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VOL. III.

LONDON:

F. V. WHITE & CO., 31, SOUTHAMPTON ST., STRAND.

1885.

256. e. 1450.



PRINTED BY
MELLY AND CO., GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS,
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

TO
ADRIENNE,
WHOSE HAND WAS THE FIRST HELD OUT TO ME
IN FELLOWSHIP ON THIS SIDE THE ATLANTIC,
I DEDICATE THIS STORY.

NEW YORK,
May, 1885.

CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—“JEMMIE’S RETURN”	1
II.—“THE FIRST ORDEAL”	31
III.—“A QUARREL”	66
IV.—“WAR TO THE KNIFE”	87
V.—“THE VERDICT”	114
VI.—“ROSES AND THORNS”	132
VII.—“REVENGE”	159
VIII.—“RELEASE”	189
IX.—“AT LAST”	208

THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE.

A LOVE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

“JEMMIE’S RETURN.”

TO return to the moment of Mr. Brooke’s arrival at Nutley—Lady Renton is as much taken by surprise at his appearance as Gladys was to be.

She is sitting with her little son at his daily lessons trying to keep his restless mind fixed on the rudiments of Latin, when Hughie leaps from his chair with a shout of welcome for the hired carriage lumbering up the drive.”

“Mama, mama! here is uncle Jemmie.”

“Uncle Jemmie, my dear. Impossible!”

She has not heard from her brother for a couple of months, and has quite decided that he intends to spend his Christmas in Calcutta.

But Hughie is positive.

"It is uncle Jemmie. I can see his face looking out of the window. Oh, do let me go!"

The child flies to the front door, and his mother follows, to find him already in the arms of his uncle.

"Oh, Jem! this is a welcome surprise," she exclaims, as he turns to greet her. "I was feeling quite unhappy at the prospect of a solitary Christmas day. My dear, dear boy. How glad I am to see you safe home again."

He bends his face, slightly bronzed by exposure to the sun of India, to kiss her, and she is startled to see how much older he appears. He left England a mere lad. He has returned to it a man—a man too with the impress of thought upon his brow.

His moustaches are longer and thicker than they used to be, his hair seems a shade darker, his eyes and mouth more serious. Elinor looks at him, and hardly knows whether to laugh or cry. He is improved beyond all doubt, but the improvement has been achieved through suffering. The metal has been refined and purified in the fire, and wrought into a thing of beauty, but it bears the marks of the hammer and anvil, and will never be the fresh, unsullied ore again.

Yet when he smiles his face possesses all the charm of old.

"If you are glad to see me, dearest Nell," he replies, "what must *I* be to get home to you again? But don't stand out here in the cold. I will be with you as soon as I have settled with the coachman. Run in, Hughie, till I come and shew you what I have brought you from India."

Lady Renton draws her little boy into the drawing-room, and stirs the fire into a

blaze in anticipation of her brother's comfort.

And it is at this moment that Gladys turns her ponies' heads into the gate, and sees the coach standing before the door. The commotion she makes in trying to retreat again, and the smothered exclamations of the groom and gardener, attract the attention of Mr. Brooke. He raises his head from the money in his hand, and catches sight of the back of the phaeton as it plunges through the plot of American shrubs.

"Who is that?" he demands of his valet, standing by.

"I think, if you please, sir, it's the pony-chaise from Carronby House. I think her ladyship is driving, sir. Shall I go and tell her you are here?"

"No, no!" said his master hurriedly, but the blood mounts to his forehead as he speaks, and the hand with which he drops the fare into the driver's palm trembles

like a leaf. Then he whistles carelessly, and divests himself of his great coat in the hall, and walks into the drawing-room with an assumption of being perfectly at his ease.

"My darling boy!" exclaims his sister as soon as he has rejoined her, "I cannot say how delighted I am to see you. I had given up all hopes of your being with us at Christmas, Jemmie. You know I have not heard from you since October, and I thought the attractions of Calcutta had been too much for you, and we should not see you till the spring."

"I hope I have not put you out, Nell. I always meant to be home for Christmas, you know, and I had nothing particular to tell you the last month."

"You have enjoyed yourself, I hope."

"Very much; but it palled a little at last. I seem to have lost my taste for balls, and we couldn't go 'shikarring' during the monsoon."

"I thought you would go to Simla with the governor's staff."

"I did think of it; but I gave up the idea. I left home, as you know, with one intention, and that being accomplished, there was no further need of delay."

"I am glad it is accomplished," says Elinor softly.

"And how's Hughie?" continues Mr. Brooke, catching up his nephew. "Did you miss uncle Jem, sir, and are you glad to see him home again?"

"Very glad! And what have you brought me?" says Hughie stoutly.

"Oh! that's it, is it? Well, you must help me unpack my boxes, and then you will see. I have brought you some lovely beaten-out gold vases and platters from Delhi, Elinor. They will be the envy of Nutley."

"How good of you, darling. How I shall value them for your sake. But you

are thinner, Jemmie, much thinner than when you went away."

"It's muscle," replies Mr. Brooke, slapping his leg, "all muscle, Nell. You should have seen the exercise I took in India at polo and pig-sticking. I was considered quite a card at both. We had some splendid polo matches, at which all the ladies of Calcutta used to turn out. Quite a beauty show, I can assure you."

"The fair Miss Temple amongst them?"

"Oh! yes. She was considered the belle of Calcutta. Nothing would have been complete without her."

"And she is really very pretty?"

"More than pretty—beautiful! One of the handsomest women I have ever seen."

"And didn't you lose your heart to her, Jemmie? I quite thought from the expressions in some of your letters that it was a case between you."

He laughs carelessly.

"Oh! that was all nonsense, put in to

amuse you. I can't lose my heart, Nell, because——(Hughie, my boy, run up to my room and see if Davis has unpacked my valise yet.)")

"Yes, Hughie," puts in his mother, who is longing to get rid of him, "run away and play now, and you shall see uncle Jemmie at luncheon."

Of course, the boy objects. What child does not object to be sent out of the room at the moment he is not wanted? But Lady Renton persuades him to leave them at last, and she and her brother are left alone.

"Well, dear Jemmie?"

"Well, what was I saying? Oh! with respect to Georgie Temple. There was never anything in it. She liked me, and I liked her. She is a capital dancer, and a very lovely girl, that's all."

"And you could resist her?"

"Easily. There was no resistance required."

"Ah! Jem, I'm afraid you're not cured yet."

"Yes, I am. I should not be in Nutley if I were not."

"Are you sure it won't break out again?"

Mr. Brooke looks very grave as he answers :

"It may. I don't expect to come off scot free ; but I have found a remedy against it."

"And what is that, dear?"

"The power of my will. The knowledge of right and wrong. The true meaning of the feeling I entertain for—for *her*."

"I don't quite follow you, Jem."

"How often I said that to poor Charlie Renton," replies her brother, smiling. "And he was so patient with my ignorance and folly. I owe it all to him, Elinor—my new way of thinking—and I shall be thankful to the last day of my life that you sent me out to meet him."

"I am so glad, Jem. But how did he benefit you?"

"He taught me to know myself, and the uses of my being. He set my feet on the right track, Nell, by making me see the selfishness of my own nature, and the way in which I was abusing it. I told you just now that I was cured. I did not mean that I was cured of my love for—for the person of whom I once spoke to you. I shall never be cured of *that* to the last day of my life. But I am cured of wishing to pervert that love to my own selfish ends, instead of her good. And so I feel I have the strength to encounter her again."

Lady Renton sighs. She has not much faith in the cure that Jemmie so implicitly believes in. She would rather hear that he had fallen in love with some eligible woman who would drive the ineligible one out of his head. Doubtless he believes in the strength of which he boasts, but he is a man—and Elinor's experience has taught

her that men's best resolutions are prone to fade away before the glamour of a woman's smiles and tears. Her brother interprets her sigh aright.

"You don't believe it," he says.

"I believe you to be perfectly sincere in what you say, dearest Jemmie."

"But you think I miscalculate the strength of which I boast. Perhaps I might, were it only on my own account. But not on *hers*!"

"Are you not afraid that proximity may weaken your good intentions, even on her account, Jemmie?"

"No. I love her too much," he answers simply.

"As much as you did when you went away?"

"Far—*far*—more, and far better. O! Elinor, I felt then as if I must tear her by force from all her surroundings to secure her for myself. And *now* I feel as if—were she in any danger from me—I would tear

her away *from* myself, and put her anywhere—in a convent—on a desert island—in *her coffin*—so that, whatever I suffered, *she* might be safe!”

“You have certainly altered,” says his sister.

“Yes, I have altered, dear, greatly, and I do not think there is any fear of my relapsing. Time and absence have worked their cure. But let us talk of something else. It is not healthy to dwell too long on an analysis of one’s own feelings. What’s the news of Nutley? Everything right on our extensive domains?”

“Everything. Your groom tells me the hunters are in capital condition, but eating their heads off, and sadly wanting their master to exercise them.”

“Dear creatures. They shall not want me long. I’ll give ‘Flyer’ a ‘bucketting’ this very afternoon. Did you buy Faker’s pony for Hugh?”

“No. When I came to consider, I

thought the price exorbitant. Besides, I felt nervous of the boy learning to ride without you."

"Silly mother! Well, he shall have the pony for a Christmas present, and I'll take him in hand and take care of him for you. You know what a famous riding master I am," with a deep sigh.

Lady Renton does not like that sigh. She has been longing to introduce the mention of Carronby and its inmates easily, and Jemmie's sigh throws her back again. But the next minute he does it himself.

"By the way," he says, "how are the cousins?"

"Mountcarron and Gladys? Oh, very well!"

"That's all right," he answers heartily.

"At least," continues Elinor, correcting herself. "Mountcarron's very well, but his wife is not."

Jemmie starts.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Nothing particular, I believe, but she is not strong, and she is very thin. I thought I might as well prepare you for seeing her, Jemmie, for she is certainly changed, and it—it might be a surprise to you."

He grows as pale as ashes.

"Are you deceiving me, Elinor?"

"Deceiving you, my dear. What do you mean?"

"Is Gladys—dying—or—or—dead?"

He speaks in a low, deliberate voice, but Lady Renton can see the effort he makes to pronounce the words.

"My dear boy—*No!* What on earth did I say to make you suppose anything so dreadful. Certainly *not*. But she is not so strong—nor does she look so well as she used to do—and as you were such intimate friends, I thought I would prepare you for the change."

"Thank you. Have you seen much of her, or Mountcarron, this autumn?"

"Very little. Gladys has not been to

Nutley more than once, but their house has been full of guests. They have been very kind in asking me over there at all times, but how could I leave Hughie? Now that you have come home I shall be able to see them oftener."

"What made Gladys ill?" he inquires, returning to the old topic.

"I can't tell you. She is very reticent upon the subject herself. But she was always a fragile creature, Jemmie. I remember thinking how consumptive she looked the first time I saw her."

"How do she and Mountcarron get on now?"

"They always seem polite enough to each other in public, but I am afraid they are not very happy. There are some very unpleasant rumours in the village about Mountcarron, Jemmie," she adds in a lower voice.

"What sort of rumours?" he asks with sudden interest.

“About him and that bold Miss Rusherton. I hear a new story concerning them nearly every day. First he has given her the brush over the head of some lady better entitled to it; next, they have been met together miles away from Carronby, or someone drops in at the Rushertons’ of an evening and finds Mountcarron comfortably ensconced there. Of course, all this makes people talk scandal, and it is most unpleasant for his friends to have to listen to it.”

“Do you mean to say that he is *flirting* with Agnes Rusherton?” demands Mr. Brooke, with knitted brows.

“What else can one think when a married man, and one in Mountcarron’s position, is seen day after day in the company of a girl like that?”

“But what are her parents about to let her be on speaking terms with a man whose wife does not visit them?”

“Gladys *does* visit them. They have dined at Carronby House.”

•

"Nell, you are joking with me. The Rushertons at Carronby House! What made Gladys invite such people? Why did not you warn her against them?"

"My dear boy, it was not her fault. Mountcarron *made* her do it. I was present at the time, and put in a mild protest, but what is the use of opposing a husband's orders to his wife?"

"Did not Gladys object?"

"Certainly she did, at first, but he combatted her scruples, and insisted on her calling on them. And since then he seems to be quite hand-in-glove with the family."

"By Heaven!" exclaims Jemmie, with clenched hands and teeth, "Mountcarron shall answer to me for this?"

"My dear brother, what can you do? what right have you to interfere?"

"The right of every man to protect every woman, to say nothing of the honour of his family. Do you think I will stand tamely by, and see Mountcarron drag our

name through the dirt, without a remonstrance? That I will let him ruin that poor child's prospects, and publish to the world that he never loved her, without crying *Shame* upon him for his cowardice? Oh, Elinor! I guessed something of all this before I left home. I saw how he neglected Gladys, and let others fill the place which should have been his own. That, perhaps, can never be remedied; but I refuse to have a public scandal made of it. I didn't—I didn't——”

“You didn't *what*, dear?” asks his sister.

“Never mind, Elinor. I was not thinking of what I said. Your unwelcome news has totally upset me. But Mountcarron had better take heed. If General Fuller heard of this——”

“Surely, Jemmie, you would never make mischief by repeating what I have told you to General Fuller,” cries Lady Renton, in alarm.

“I would repeat it to everybody, if it

would do any good, or save that poor girl from such an indignity. But the more secret we keep it, the better. Only it must be stopped, Elinor; it *must*, and *shall* be, stopped."

"When shall you go over and see them?"

Mr. Brooke looks uneasy, and begins to stammer.

"I don't know! I cannot tell. To-morrow, perhaps, if I have time."

"To-morrow is a hunting day. The hounds meet at Wordly Copse. I suppose Mountcarron and Miss Rusherton will be there. I believe they have not missed a meet this season."

"Does not Gladys hunt, too?"

"Oh, no! She has given up riding altogether. She tells me she is not strong enough. Shall you ride to hounds to-morrow, Jemmie?"

"Perhaps I may. I am not sure. I should like to find out a little more about Mountcarron and Miss Rusherton first, for

were I to see them together, and at all confidential, I am afraid I couldn't keep my hands off him."

"Oh! Jemmie! remember, he is your cousin."

"I remember, more plainly, that Gladys is my friend."

"Might not the world misinterpret your chivalry on her behalf?" demands Lady Renton, hesitatingly.

He stops short, and regards her fixedly. Her eyes droop, but his are steadfast.

"I shall not care what the '*world*' thinks," he answers, slowly, "so long as I have the approval of my own conscience. And from this moment to my last, Elinor, my protection, and all the best energies I possess, will be at the service of my cousin, Gladys Mountcarron."

He debates with himself after this whether he shall attend the meet upon the following day, or pay a call at Carronby House; and, for a while, his inclinations tend in the

direction of the latter. Gladys may confide in him—he hopes she may—and afford him an opening to espouse her cause. But when it comes to the point, his courage oozes out at his finger's ends, and he feels he cannot trust himself to meet her, for the first time after that terrible parting, alone. He has the strength of a giant, compared with what he used to have, in her presence ; but he is not yet strong enough for that. So he alters his mind for the twentieth time, and rides to Wordley Copse instead to join the meet. The first people whom he encounters are Mountcarron and Agnes Rusherton, whose horses are standing side by side waiting the signal to be off.

The earl greets his cousin with all his old cordiality, and Miss Rusherton would evidently join her welcome to his. But Jemmie only bows to the lady, whilst he grasps Mountcarron's hand with a warm pressure. He may be behaving thoughtlessly and wickedly, but Mr. Brooke cannot

forget, in this moment of reunion, all the kindness and hospitality he has received from him.

“My dear fellow,” cries the earl, “where do you spring from? I thought you had given up all idea of coming home this winter.”

“No, indeed,” says Jemmie, “that must have been Elinor’s fancy, for I never told her so. I arrived yesterday afternoon, unexpectedly, as you may suppose, or I should have written to let you know.”

“Well, it’s good to have you back again, old boy, for I’ve missed you dreadfully this season. Have you seen Gladys yet?”

At that name the tell-tale blood mounts to Mr. Brooke’s forehead, and Miss Rusherton perceives it.

“No. I came straight from Nutley.”

“You must come back with me after the run and dine with us. Gladys will be quite glad to see you again. You know Miss Rusherton?”

"I have that honour," replies Jemmie, bowing for the second time.

"Ah, she's a famous horsewoman ! How many brushes have you taken this season, Miss Rusherton ?"

"Five ; but I owe them all to your lordship's kindness. If you did not take such good care of me, I should not be in at the death so often."

"By Jove ! you are better able to take of me," says Mountcarron, with undisguised admiration. "You ride like a bird, and make no more of a fence than if it were a molehill. It's perfectly wonderful to see her go, Jem, and you'll say as much yourself in another minute."

"I have often had the' pleasure of admiring Miss Rusherton's horsewoman-ship," replies Jemmie, though gravely.

"But you are not given to so much flattery as his lordship," says Agnes ; "and it is just as well, for you would quite turn my head between the two of you. Lord

Mountcarron is terrible—simply terrible—but, luckily for me, I don't believe one half he says."

"O, come now, that's not fair, upon my soul it isn't," exclaims Mountcarron, "when the truth is that I dare not say half I think about you."

Miss Rusherton, who is looking extremely handsome in a dark blue habit, smiles consciously and looks down, and Jemmie is delighted the next moment to hear the "view halloo," that enables him to start "Flyer" and leave the couple to their own devices.

He cannot help seeing them occasionally, however, during the day, nor speaking to them when they are temporarily thrown together, and Mountcarroh's mode of addressing Miss Rusherton is so familiar, and she is so evidently considered to be his property by the rest of the field, that Jemmie has no doubt in his own mind that gossip, for once, tells the truth when it

connects their names together. The sight of their flirtation in so public a place, and the idea of how sorely Gladys' pride must be wounded by the circumstance, renders his heart sore, and his countenance sad, and when the finish comes he is much more ready to return to Nutley, than to go on to Carronby House. But his cousin will take no excuse. It is in vain that Jemmie pleads his hunter's fatigue, or his own lack of suitable apparel. Back to Carronby he must go, and in pink must he dine, or Mountcarron will be seriously offended, and never forgive him on this side of the grave.

"And what will Gladys say," he continues, "when she hears that you have passed the gates of Carronby, after a twelvemonth's absence, and refused to go in and say good-day to her?"

"Yes, you really *should* think of poor Lady Mountcarron, Mr. Brooke," interpolates Miss Rusherton unpleasantly. "I

am sure she is dying to see you. She must have missed you dreadfully. You used to be so *very* much together. It would be too cruel of you not to think of her."

"You are very good," he replies sarcastically, "to plead my cousin's cause with me, Miss Rusherton, but I assure you your trouble is thrown away. If everyone thought as much of Lady Mountcarron as I do, she would never need an advocate. Mountcarron, old fellow, I will go home with you with pleasure, that is, if you are sure to be alone."

"*Alone!* Of course we are—at least, there's only Thursby and his wife with us at present. Why should you think we were not alone, Jem?"

"I had no reason for thinking so, but I am not dressed for company."

"Bother your dress, man! You're not with the governor's staff at Calcutta now. remember. By-the-way, what was that I heard about a certain beauty you met

there? Not caught yet, Jem—still free as air?"

"Still free as air, Mountcarron."

"What a marvel! You must have a heart made of stone if the stories Elinor told us about the houris you met in India were true."

"Perhaps Mr. Brooke did not take his heart out to India with him," observes Agnes Rusherton.

"It would be awkward to travel without it," he grumbles in return.

"Not if you left it in safe keeping, Mr. Brooke."

"By Jove! that reminds me of something I heard before you went away, Jem," laughs Mountcarron. "Was there any truth in it? Does the fair pilferer really live in Carronby?"

"No," replies Jemmie stoutly, but he colours as he tells the falsehood.

"Oh, Mr. Brooke, you look horribly guilty!" titters Miss Rusherton. "Doesn't

he now, my lord? Look how he's blushing. We've caught him at last, and I'll never believe after this but that the lady is in Carronby."

"By George! perhaps it's yourself, Agnes," exclaims the earl, never heeding the coarseness of the insinuation had it been true.

"Oh, Lord Mountcarron! As if Mr. Brooke would even deign to think of *me*!" she cries, with affected humility.

"You cannot believe me guilty of such an unpardonable piece of presumption," says Jemmie, eager to change the subject. "I leave that for somebody with far superior claims to mine."

Miss Rusherton would like to rally Jemmie on this assertion, and convince him that his modesty is unwelcome to her, for she has always admired him, and had many a flirtation with him in the hunting field of old. But the presence of the earl restrains her. She hardly knows yet what is to be

the issue of her dangerous acquaintanceship with him, but she will not spoil her chances of whatever may lie in the future by offending him now. So she only smiles consciously, and glances at Lord Mountcarron, who says, that, by Jove! his cousin has less pluck than modesty, and if *he* had been a free man, he should have left no stone unturned until he won her. And then, to Jemmie's relief, they meet old Mr. Rusherton, also mounted, who insists upon taking charge of his daughter, and the cousins are left to ride on to Carronby House alone.

Mountcarron's tongue runs fast on every possible topic, but Jemmie's grows more and more leaden as the moment draws nearer when he must encounter Gladys again.

He hardly knows how he gets out of his saddle and follows the earl into the Hall, where the old familiar objects seem to be blurred and indistinct, and the family

portraits are dancing up and down. A servant relieves him of his hunting-cap and crop, and then he stumbles after his cousin into the library, and stretches out his hand towards a black-robed figure standing on the hearthrug.



CHAPTER II.

“THE FIRST ORDEAL.”

THE library at Carronby House has not been fitted up to order by the upholsterers. It is a very perfect one of its kind, for everything it contains is genuine. Lord Mountcarron has travelled a good deal in his younger days, and been rather proud of his good fortune in detecting and securing articles of value and antiquity. The stained-glass windows, which exclude the sun from his library, are made of panes picked up here and there—fragments of church decorations, or remnants from some baronial hall, now gone to rack and ruin with its owner.

The old oak furniture with which it is

filled came from Flanders, and Belgium, and Germany. The straight-backed settles, and stiff-looking chairs are worm-eaten through length of days, and the tapestry which clothes the walls is real Gobelin.

How often has Jemmie sat side by side with Gladys on those straight, hard benches, which have been adjusted to the use of modern society by velvet seats and cushions? How often has he lain at full length along the white bear-skin rug on which she stands, basking in the glow of the wood fire, whilst her sweet voice broke in, every now and again upon his reveries, with some low-toned murmur of content. But he cannot remember these things now in the surprise of meeting her again. She might be a spirit newly risen from the dead, as she stands there, with an out-stretched hand, to greet him. Her large, scared eyes, seem to have dilated supernaturally wide at his sudden ap-

pearance. Her face, always a little sharp in its outlines, is thin to attenuation. Her cheeks have fallen in, and two bright crimson spots glow beneath her eyes. Her figure is slighter than ever beneath the folds of her velvet dress, and the hand she extends to him is almost transparent. In the shock of seeing her thus, Mr. Brooke forgets his nervousness. He advances quickly, with a word of distress upon his lips, to seize that little fading hand. But as he does so, he feels it sway and quiver in his grasp, and the next moment Lady Mountcarron lies stretched unconscious upon the bear-skin rug.

In her agitation, and combined pain and pleasure at seeing him, she has fainted. An exclamation from Jemmie brings the earl to her side.

"My God, Mountcarron! See here! What is it? What has happened to her?"

"By Jove! fainted!" says Mountcarron,

with marital indifference. "Now, what's the meaning of this, I wonder?"

"Are you sure she has only fainted? Ring for assistance, for Heaven's sake, man! Send for her women, or some one to revive her!"

"Why, what should it be but a faint?" remarks the earl, as he rings the bell, and desires the servant to send her ladyship's maid to her without delay. "Women are always at this sort of thing, you know—at least, in the hot weather. Why, even Miss Rusherton fainted one day last summer, after a long ride, and see how strong and healthy she is!"

"Oh, d——n Miss Rusherton," exclaims Jemmie, less politely than graphically, as he bends anxiously over Gladys's white face and prostrate form. In another minute the lady's maid enters the room, and cries out on seeing her mistress's condition.

"Oh, dear, dear! has my lady swooned

again? This makes the third time this week. I can't think what's taken her lately. Please let me attend to her, sir. If you gentlemen will be good enough to leave me alone with her ladyship, I can bring her to in half the time. No, I don't want water nor anything. Nothing but the fresh air, and for you gentlemen to go away and leave us to ourselves."

"Come along, Brooke; we're no use here. Women understand each other's tricks better than we do," says Mountcarron. "Let's go upstairs and get ready for dinner."

Jemmie follows him reluctantly and with many a longing look cast behind him, nor can his cousin draw him into conversation. His heart is aching all the while to learn why Gladys has fainted. Was it from sheer pleasure at his appearance, or is she so weak as to be unable to bear any excitement? Is it the annoyance and disappointment consequent on her husband's alleged

neglect of her that has wrought this visible alteration in her appearance, or is it fretting for their enforced separation? As the latter suggestion makes itself felt to him, Jemmie's rebel heart throbs anew with mixed happiness and pain.

"What's the matter with you, Jem?" demands the earl, as they descend to the dining-room together. "You're as glum as an owl."

"I can't help thinking of your wife, Mountcarron. That fainting seems to me a very serious thing, and did you hear what the maid said, that it was the third time it had occurred this week. Have you consulted a doctor about her?"

"No; I never knew she had fainted till to-night. If a woman shuts herself up within herself, and hardly ever opens her mouth, what can you expect? She has never said she was ill, but Gladys is so deuced reserved with me that I am not surprised at that."

"She must have altered greatly in character since I saw her, Mountcarron. I never thought Gladys of a reserved disposition."

"She may not have been so with you, but she always was with me. About this weakness or whatever it is she suffers from, her father gave me a talking to, as if it was my fault, last season. I did all I could then. I said 'Let her have the best advice London can afford,' but she wouldn't hear of it. You know how cursed obstinate women can be when they choose. She preferred to go with the Fullers to Ryde instead, and when she came home she said she was all right again, and, of course, I believed her."

"But has she been as weak as this ever since?"

"I am sure I can't tell you. I know she has made herself very unpleasant the whole autumn, and refused to ride or dance or do anything. I thought perhaps she

was turning pious, but I let her have her own way. It's always the easiest plan in the end."

"But I don't think that you ought to have let her have her own way in *this* case, Mountcarron. I assure you I am very much shocked at her appearance. She is terribly changed since last year, and I think you should have medical advice for her at once."

"Well, there's no difficulty about that. I suppose Doctor Chambers will do well enough, and half-an-hour will bring him here at any time. But let's have dinner now, Jem, for goodness' sake, for I'm as hungry as a hunter."

"Won't you enquire how she is before we sit down?" says Jem anxiously.

"Perhaps it will be as well. Here, John, go and ask her ladyship's maid how she is by this time, and if she is coming down to dinner."

The man returns with the answer that

Lady Mountcarron is better, but that she has gone to bed, and will not appear again that evening.

So the two cousins go in to dinner together rather gloomily, and one of them at least in the lowest of spirits.

Before he leaves Carronby that evening, Mr. Brooke writes a little note to Gladys and sends it up by her maid—a very innocent little note, but one that makes her cheeks glow, and her heart throb as much as ever they did in the days of old.

"MY DEAR GLADYS :—

"I am truly concerned to find you looking so ill and weak, and disappointed not to have been able to speak to you. I shall look in again to-morrow at luncheon time in hopes you may be downstairs again.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"JAMES BROOKE."

And as Jemmie bids Mountcarron "good-night," he says, true to the new resolutions which he has made :

"I have written Gladys a line to say I shall come to luncheon to-morrow and hope to find her well again."

"I hope you may," rejoins the earl, and immediately resolves that it will be an excellent opportunity to pay a visit to the Rushertons, as Gladys and Jem will be so engrossed with each other's company that they will not remark his absence from the house. So that when Mr. Brooke, after a sleepless night, returns to Carronby, he finds his cousin Gladys alone. She is waiting him in the dining-room, where the luncheon table is spread for them.

She has thought at first that she would meet him in the library, but when the time comes she finds her strength unequal to the task, and flies to the presence of the butler and footman as a protection against herself. Mr. Brooke enters the room, looking almost

as white as she is, and takes her hand in silence. For a moment neither speak. The servants are passing in and out of the open doorway, they are comparatively unobserved. Then Jemmie says, in a low, trembling voice that struggles hard to be firm :

"You are better, I hope?"

"Oh, yes. I am better, thank you."

"You frightened us terribly yesterday."

"Did I? It is nothing. I often faint."

"You used not to do so."

"No, I used not. Shall we begin luncheon? I think it is ready."

They sit down opposite to each other, and commence the farce of taking food on their plates and turning it round and round with their knives and forks and sending it away again. They think they deceive the servants by the performance of this little comedy, but the servants understand plainly enough that Mr. Brooke and her

ladyship are both too much agitated to eat.

"Will you take some wine, Gladys?" says Jemmie presently.

"I never drink it, thanks."

"I think you ought to do so. I think you are just in that condition when a little stimulant is absolutely necessary for you."

"Very well! I will take it if you wish me to do so," she answers, falling unconsciously into her old habit of deference to all his wishes.

Jemmie sighs as he fills up a glass of old Madeira, and hands it across the table to her. As she takes it, their eyes meet, and hers are full of tears.

"Drink it quick," he says with forced gaiety. "It will do you all the good in the world. It is just what you want."

She swallows it obediently, and it gives her the strength she requires to keep down the emotion which was just about to get the mastery over her. But as the meal

draws to an end, both of them feel embarrassed. At last they will be alone, but they regard the ordeal with very different eyes. Gladys is trembling with excitement at the prospect. They will come to an explanation. All the misery of that terrible parting will be explained away and atoned for, and her friend—her lover—will be her own again. The future will be one long, sweet, summer's day of joy. This is what she has been waiting for through all the dreary months of separation. It is what she has prayed for, hoped for, lived for, and it is in her very hand. No wonder that her cheeks burn with the anticipation of renewed happiness, as she leads the way to the library. Mr. Brooke, on the other hand, is dreading the explanation that evidently lies before him. If he entertained any doubt why Gladys was so agitated on meeting him the night before, he has none now. Every look of her eyes, every expression on her beautiful

face, has told him the truth. The trial of parting with him has been too much for her strength. She loves him still, she is ready to tell him so, and if he is to be true to his colours and do his duty it behoves him to prevent it.

Poor Jemmie does not feel much like doing his duty, as he follows the girl he so much loves to this private interview. If he followed the impulses of his nature, and his inclination, he would take her frail form, then and there, into his arms and swear to protect it with his life for ever. But the principles which separation and thought have implanted in his breast, are true as himself. The long periods of solitary reflection which he has spent in India and elsewhere, when his soul has stood, as it were, face to face with her own weakness, have borne precious fruit. He loves Gladys as much as ever, indeed, if possible, he feels he loves her more than ever, but he loves her in a different way.

He sees her—as Charlie Renton told him to see her—not as she *is*, but as she *may* be, and he would die now, sooner than sully her whiteness, or drag her down to a lower level than that whereon she stands. He is thinking all this, but so sadly, as he follows her to the library, and his handsome face is downcast, as he closes the door behind them.

Gladys, on the contrary, is almost radiant. The wine has given her an unusual stimulus, and as she casts herself into an armchair and beckons him to occupy a seat beside her, she looks as far as expression goes like her old self again.

"Come here!" she says, in a voice trembling with emotion, "come here! and tell me all you have done and thought of since you went away."

"I am afraid that would take a longer time than I should care to talk, or you to listen, Gladys," he answers, as he accepts the chair she indicates. "I have been

absent such a long time—let me see! almost a year, is it not? Positively almost a year.”

He is determined to be extremely natural and very brave, but he has to clench his teeth to prevent his voice trembling as much as her own.

“You left us on the 14th of April,” says Gladys, with fatal accuracy, “and it is now the 22nd of December—eight months and eight days. It seems longer, Jemmie, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it seems much longer.”

“And are you glad or sorry to come back again?”

She puts her hand upon his as she speaks, and the young man presses it and puts it back upon her lap.

“I am very *sorry* to find you in this state of health. It is what I particularly want to speak to you about, Gladys. What is the matter with you, and how did it happen?”

"I really cannot answer either question. I am weak, I think, and that is all."

"But when did this weakness first shew itself?"

"During the season. I danced too much and flirted too much, I suppose. Once or twice when I was overtired I felt an excruciating pain in my back, which turned me sick and faint; but I fancied it was only fatigue. Then I went to Ryde with my mother and the dear old dad, and the sea-bathing seemed to set me up. But when I returned to Carrowly, the pain came back, and lately it has been very bad, and brings on those fainting fits. I tried to ride this autumn, but it was of no use. I had to lie down on the sofa sometimes for hours afterwards."

"But, Gladys, this is a very serious matter. What advice have you had?"

"None."

Mr. Brooke rises from his seat and begins to pace the library floor.

"But you *must* have advice, and at once. I am surprised that Mountcarron has not insisted on it. This should have been attended to months ago."

"What is the use?" demands Gladys languidly. "I don't want to be well. There is nothing to be well for."

"Oh! Gladys!" he commences, and there stops.

"It is the truth, Jemmie. Who cares what becomes of me, unless it is my darling old dad? As for Mountcarron, the sooner I am out of *his* way the better. And for myself, you must know how little I have to live for."

"Nonsense, child, you have all your life and the world before you! You have everything a woman can have to live for. A proud position, rank, wealth——"

"Ah! don't taunt me with *that*!" she cries, suddenly hiding her face in her hands.

"*Taunt* you, my dear girl? I would be

the last person in the world to do it! But these things are of value to you, and justly so."

"They are *not!* they are *not!* I never knew of how little value they were to me until I had given up my very life for them. Ah! Jemmie, don't pretend to misunderstand me. If I am dying—and I hope I am—you know that it is for *your* sake!"

Mr. Brooke suddenly straightens all his limbs, and throws out his muscles as if he were going in for a stand-up fight. The supreme moment has come. Whatever he feels she must not see it. But the tone in which he answers is just a trifle too jaunty to be quite natural.

"Nonsense, Gladys! I won't have you talk such rubbish. *Dying!* You are no more dying than I am. But I can see that you are unhappy, and I understand the reason. Mountcarron has both hurt and offended you. He has lowered your dignity and his own. I am very sorry

to hear the reports that are going about Carronby with respect to him and Miss Rusherton; but I think we can put a stop to them. He was always partial to me, you know, and I hope that, if I place the matter before him in its true light, he will see the folly of it. He is selfish, Gladys, and he may be a little infatuated with this girl; but he is not dishonourable, and I feel sure he has but to be warned of the danger to avoid it."

Lady Mountcarron draws her slight form up to its full height.

"Not on *my* account, I beg, Jemmie. My husband is welcome to follow his own inclinations in every respect, as far as I am concerned. Were he to run away with Miss Rusherton to-morrow, it would not make the slightest difference to me."

"You miscalculate your powers of endurance, Gladys. What would happen if Mountcarron were to elope with Miss Rusherton? You would divorce him, and

in all probability he would marry her and make her Countess of Mountcarron. How would your pride stand that?"

"Perhaps I should *not* divorce him."

"Then you would compel him to live in sin, and leave yourself in a very equivocal position in society. No, Gladys; depend upon it you would regret his taking that step almost as much as he would. At any cost, it must be prevented."

The only answer Lady Mountcarron makes to this appeal is by laying her head down on the cushions of her chair, and bursting into a wild fit of weeping. He is by her side in a moment.

"My dear girl, why do you profess to be so indifferent to your husband's doings? It is his misconduct that has caused all your illness. He ought to be ashamed of himself, and if the plain truth can make him so, he shall hear it. Trust to me, Gladys, to stand your friend in this matter. We will not see our family disgraced with-

out making an effort to prevent it. Believe me, all will be right."

But she shakes off the kindly touch he has laid upon her arm as if it stung her.

"It is *not* so. You are utterly mistaken," she gasps. "I care nothing—*nothing*—for what he says or does. Let him go—the sooner the better—so that only *you* remain to comfort me."

"Gladys, you are not thinking of what you say."

"I am. I have thought of every word until it is burned into my very soul. O! Jemmie, I refused to leave Carronby with you, but the effort has nearly killed me. I cannot live without you. My life has been one long hell without the sound of your voice, and the sight of your face. I cannot endure it any longer. Forgive me for what I said then. I was mad. I did not know—I could not realise—what parting from you would be. O! take me, Jemmie, take me away from all this, that I so much hate

and abhor, and let me live out the rest of my life by your side."

She has risen from her chair during this speech, and thrown herself into his arms. She is leaning on his breast in such a manner that he must clasp her, or she would fall, and her pale face, drowned in tears, is lifted with all the sweet familiarity of old to his own. The young man shakes in every limb. His strong arms feel as if they had scarcely strength to support their light burden. But he just touches her white forehead with his lips, and then, with a mighty exercise of self-control, places her back in the arm chair from which she rose.

"Calm yourself, dear Gladys," he says, in a very uncertain voice; "this agitation will do you harm."

"You do not believe me," she cries despairingly. "You think that because I was such a coward I dared not make up my mind all at once, that I never loved you

as I said I did. But, O! Jemmie, if I could tell you what I have suffered. When I found that you had really gone I thought I should have died. All my illness comes from that. I wanted to die. I took no care of myself. I tried if flirting, and dancing, and racketting about would drive away my thoughts of you. But it was of no use. Your face has haunted me night and day. O! my darling—my darling—believe me that nothing is worth anything to me in comparison with yourself. I have learned the lesson through months of bitter agony. I love you like my very life—better than anything else in the whole world.”

“I believe you, Gladys,” he says, mournfully.

“And you will take me away, as you promised to do?” she continues, lifting her eyes to his. “You will take me far away, darling, where I shall forget I ever knew the places and people whom I so much detest.”

But his silence, and his averted look, arouse her suspicions.

"Why do you not speak?" she asks him. "Why do you not tell me it shall be so?"

"Because," he answers slowly, "I cannot."

"*You cannot!* Do you mean that you refuse my love?"

"Yes, dear," he says sadly, "I refuse it. God knows what it costs me to do so, but I *refuse it!*"

"*You refuse?—you—who* cursed me, when I hesitated to give up the world and the affection of my family for your sake!—who said you hoped to live to see me stripped of everything I possessed, who said I sent you away with the devil in your heart——"

"Oh, hush—hush, Gladys! For pity's sake do not remind me of the blasphemies I uttered at that moment!"

"Why should I not remind you of them?"

Are you not wringing my heart with every word you utter? I have wept and prayed for this moment," she goes on passionately. "I have thought of it through sleepless nights, and days of pain—the moment when I should see you again, and tell you it was all a mistake, and that I was yours, and only yours, for ever! And now it has come, and you reject my love. You said the devil went with you when I sent you away! It shall be more with me than that. *I will go to the devil* straight as I can, since you have cast me out of your heart!"

"Never, Gladys! whilst I live to prevent you!"

"How can you prevent me? What right have you to try to prevent me? Do you think I will live here with Mountcarron, and the knowledge that I have lost you? I can't—*I won't*. I will go away with the first man that asks me! Everyone is not so fastidious or so fickle as

you are, and if you will not take me away from Carronby, there are plenty who will!"

She seems to have forgotten all her weakness. She is like a little demon in her rage.

Mr. Brooke can only stand by and listen.

"Gladys, pity me!" he manages to say at last. "If you only knew how bitterly I have repented of that time, how unworthy my conduct appears in my own eyes, with what horror I contemplate the gulf in which I tried to involve you! Oh, believe me, that I love you, far, *far* more than I did then; but my eyes are opened, and I dare not even contemplate doing what I had once set my heart upon. Gladys, you believe I love you?"

"No, I do *not* believe it! I don't believe in the love which can lower me in my own esteem! It would be far more honest in you to say that you are sick of me, or

have conceived some new fancy, or forgotten all about that—that miserable time, than to insult me as you have done, and call it *love* !”

“ Oh, Gladys, what shall I say to you ? How shall I convince you of the height of the pedestal on which my purer love has set you ? I remember (but too well) all that I said—all that I swore. I know that I tried my hardest to pull you down into the dirt, for others, far less worthy than yourself, to trample on, and that I called that wish, which only sprung from my own base desires ‘*love*.’ But this bitter parting has made me see my conduct with clearer eyes. It has made me see how much purer your nature is than mine—how far above me you are—how much too good to be made the tool of my lower feelings. It has made me see that the more I truly love you, the more I shall try to raise, and not debase you, and that the higher and more sacred I hold you in my estimation, the higher I

shall rise in my own. Do not misunderstand me, dear. Believe that what I say is true!"

"I do *not* believe it," reiterates Lady Mountcarron.

Mr. Brooke is startled by this assertion. He knows but little of women, even after an experience of five-and-twenty years, if he thinks that any one of them—even the best of her sex—will thank him for putting her right when she is wrong. Gladys knows that Jemmie's arguments are honourable, and just, and true. Perhaps, in her secret soul, she admires him for maintaining them, but she will never give him the satisfaction of hearing her say so. On the contrary, his perplexed and puzzled brow is actually pleasing to her.

"If you really think so highly of me," she goes on presently, "you would have prevented my degrading myself as I have done."

"How have you degraded yourself?"

“By saying what I did to you. What greater degradation can there be for a woman than to offer to live with a man who does not care a snap of the fingers for her?”

“O, Gladys, how little you women know of a man’s nature or feelings towards the woman whom he loves! Nothing you could say could degrade you in my eyes. And to offer to give yourself to me—to resign the world for my sake, to spend the rest of your life by my side! Why nothing you have ever said or done has made me think you such an angel before. I could worship you for that sweet offer, Gladys.”

“And yet you reject it.”

“Ah! don’t make my self-imposed penance so much harder than it is. If you only knew what that rejection costs me! But I *do* reject—for *your* sake, not my own. I love you too much to become your moral murderer.”

“Very well,” she exclaims petulantly,

"say no more about it, pray. Go away again, if you see fit, and marry some one else. It will be all the same to me, now, what you do !"

"I shall never marry anyone else, Gladys."

"You—you—were in love with that Miss Temple, at Calcutta. Elinor told us so. She fully expected you to marry her, and I wish you had, and never come home again."

"Elinor was talking of what she knew nothing. I have never been in love with any woman except one, Gladys."

"And you have cured yourself soon enough of that."

He sighs deeply, but makes no answer.

Their wretched hearts seem almost to have ceased beating. Hers has sunk like a heavy stone in her breast, and his drags on in a dull, leaden manner, as if its slow action would suffocate him.

"Gladys!" he articulates at last, "be-

cause I cannot be your lover, will you refuse to have me as a friend?"

"I don't want you as a friend. I have more friends than I know what to do with. I hate friends. They are never true."

"You *do* want a friend," he continues, without heeding her petulance. "Your married life has come to a crisis, Gladys, and you want a man to stand up for you and defend your rights. It is folly to say you don't care what Mountcarron does. You *must* care. The honour of your name is concerned in it. If he is determined to have his own way, in spite of all argument or remonstrance, why, of course, he must, but we'll have a fight for it first."

"You can do as you choose. I shall not interfere. What good will it do? You don't know how far the affair has gone. Every servant in the house, and labourer in the village, knows of his infatuation and comments on it. The day before yesterday I came upon him myself, in Moonlight Dell,

walking up and down with his arm round Miss Rusherton's waist. Do you suppose I cried over it? I have wasted my tears once too often, Jemmie. I shall never cry over anything again."

Mr. Brooke has sprung up with something very like an oath upon his lips, as she mentions Moonlight Dell; but it is checked by the remembrance that *he* has no right to censure or condemn.

"What's the good of swearing?" continues Gladys. "If I don't mind it, why should you? You know that I can have no sentiment in the matter. Mountcarron and I have been more than indifferent to each other for a long time past, so don't imagine that it hurts *me*. Nothing can hurt me now."

"But it hurts *me*," says Jemmie.

"I don't know why it should! You are not usually so sympathetic with your neighbours' shortcomings."

"And another thing hurts me, Gladys—

and that is, your indifference to your own suffering! Will you promise me to call in advice for yourself? Not the Carronby doctor, but some well-known London physician, who is competent to give us a decided opinion on your case. Will you promise?"

"I really do not see the necessity."

"But your friends do! You would not like to be an invalid all your life?"

"I should not care!"

"Oh, Gladys!" he exclaims in a voice of distress, "don't make life so hard for both of us. Don't throw away your precious health, just because you are a little angry with me."

"Who said it was because of that?"

"I must go," cries Jemmie, suddenly; "if I stay here any longer, you will drive me mad. But say (before we part) that you will still look upon me as your friend."

His eyes are bent upon her wistfully,

but Gladys has turned away, and will not look at him.

"Gladys!" he exclaims imploringly.

"Oh, go away!" she says impatiently, "Don't worry me any more! You have made me feel as if I never wished to see you again. Go away and leave me to myself. I have more than enough to think of."

He turns from her then, not angrily, but in silence, and softly closes the library door behind him. But as he passes through the hall, he puts up his hand and brushes away the tears that have gathered in his eyes.



CHAPTER III.

“ A QUARREL.”

AS Mr. Brooke strolls leisurely down the drive of Carronby House, on his way to the stables to fetch his horse, he feels very sad and downcast.

It is a disheartening thing for either man or woman, when they have been trampling on their own inclinations from an honest sense of right, to find their motives are misinterpreted—their self-control attributed to coldness—and their virtue to indifference.

Jemmie would give worlds to be able to reconcile it with his conscience to go back and tell Lady Mountcarron the whole truth, as it is burning in his heart at this moment.

He thought he had, but she must have misunderstood him, or surely she would have helped his purpose, instead of hindering it. Well—he thinks to himself—he will leave it to Time, and another opportunity, to undeceive her. Meanwhile, however Gladys may misjudge his feelings, he will not again desert her. He will remain in Nutley, and be at hand to help her when she needs help. As he turns into the stable-yard, the first sight that greets him is that of Mountcarron, recalling all his resolutions to remonstrate with him upon his conduct. The earl is standing in the centre of the yard, watching the plunges, kicks, and attempts at biting of a weedy, ewe-necked gelding that the grooms are holding, with that look of disdain which servants accustomed to the care of thoroughbred horses invariably bestow on a second-rate animal.

"What, in the name of patience, have you there?" exclaims Jemmie.

"Holloa, Jem, is that you? Did you ever see such a vicious beast? Look at his eye as he watches the groom's hand. I bet you wouldn't ride him once round the park without being floored."

"Don't want to try," replies Jemmie, with a nod to one of the stable helps to bring out "Flyer."

"But *she* did—Miss Rusherton, you know. By Jove! you should have seen her sit the brute, whilst it was plunging enough to unseat a centaur. Some fool in the village sent the animal up for her to try, and I advised her not to mount it—made sure every bone in her body would be smashed. But she's got the courage of a lioness. Never saw such a girl in all my life. Swore she would ride the beast, if it killed her. So then I bet 'Goldfly' against it she'd never keep on, and I lost my bet, by Jove! So 'Goldfly' is gone, and I have this bargain on my hands instead."

"Not worth a ten pound note, my lord,

without its wices," remarks the head groom, with a dissatisfied air.

"Do you mean to say that you exchanged your chesnut, 'Goldfly,' for that weedy animal? Why, he cost you a hundred and fifty, didn't he?" says Jem.

"What if he did? If he had cost me five hundred, she's worth it, every penny—Miss Rusherton, I mean. She's the pluckiest girl I ever met, and the boldest rider. I'd trust her with every horse in my stable, and she'd do credit to them, whatever they were. And don't she look well in a riding-habit, too? I think she is the best made woman I ever saw."

"Are you going to stand here much longer watching the antics of that brute?" says Jemmie, anxious to stop the conversation, "because, if so, I will wish you good day."

"Why need you go so soon? It's only four o'clock. Send 'Flyer' back to his stall, and stay to dinner with us."

"No, thank you, Mountcarron. My sister expects me home this evening. I have hardly seen anything of her yet."

"Wait a minute then, and I'll ride part of the way with you. I want to give that brute a lesson. Stand at his head, Robert, whilst I mount. That's it. Now for a trial of arms."

"Just keep his heels clear of 'Flyer,' please. I value my horses more than you seem to do yours, since you throw them away on a mere acquaintance."

"Agnes Rusherton isn't a mere acquaintance," replies the earl, as they turn out of the stable yard. "She is an intimate and valued friend of mine, and I'd part with any horse in my stable to give her pleasure."

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Mountcarron."

"Why should you be sorry? She is a charming girl, and a very handsome one. I'm sure you can't deny that."

"I deny nothing with regard to her personal attractions; but I think it is a great pity you should express your admiration of them so freely before your grooms."

Mountcarron colours, and looks annoyed.

"I don't know what right you have to speak to me like that."

"No right at all, except that of relationship, and, I may add, affection. It's no use ignoring the truth, Mountcarron. The story of your intimacy with Agnes Rusherton is all over Carronby and Nutley. It was the first news that met me on my return, and, as I said just now, I was deuced sorry to hear it."

"I know who was your informant—my wife——"

"Excuse me! I spoke to Lady Mountcarron for the first time this afternoon, and I heard the reports about you the first hour of my arrival. In fact, if you wish to know, it was Elinor who told me of them, and I need not add that she is no ready

scandal-monger. But she is as unhappy about it as I am."

"I don't see that there is anything to make either of you unhappy."

"What, not when every common lout in the village, or hind upon your own estate, knows (or thinks he knows) that you are in love with Miss Rusherton, and speculates on the possible result over his pint of beer? Is our name sunk so low as this, Mountcarron, that you consider that what you say or do is of no consequence to your family or the world at large?"

"Am I never to have a friend, or to take pleasure in the society of anyone, without being scandalised for it?" bursts out the earl angrily. "I have precious little companionship or sympathy at home, I can tell you that. It is no wonder I go elsewhere for it."

"I do not suppose anyone would grudge your entering into society, so long as you kept to that in your own sphere. But the

Rushertons are not in your sphere, and you know it as well as I do."

"They are congenial to me, whether they are my equals or not, and that is more than Lady Mountcarron is."

"It hardly becomes me to introduce your wife's name in the matter, but have you *tried* to make a companion of her, Mountcarron?"

"No, and I don't want to do so. She has been cold as ice to me from the beginning. I attributed it all to maiden modesty before our marriage, but I know it by its true name now. She does not care a rap for me. Probably she cares for someone else. To judge by her conduct last season, most people would have thought so."

Jemmie's heart stands still at this innuendo, but he contrives to stammer out:

"By her conduct last season?"

"Yes. You should have seen the open way in which she flirted. It was positively

disgraceful. There was a fellow of the name of Harrington, an *attaché*, or something of the sort, and the way Gladys carried on with him was the talk of London. And then I heard that he was an old lover, and had proposed to her before ever I came on the *tapis*. Pleasant! wasn't it? Her ladyship need not be surprised if I flirt after that."

"Forgive my plainness, but am I to understand, then, that you are flirting with Miss Rusherton out of pique for some supposed levity on the part of your wife?"

"Not a bit of it. I flirt with Agnes (if you choose to call it a flirtation) because I like her, and she likes me. We suit each other. I can appreciate a fine, handsome, dashing woman, who rides at everything, and doesn't mind cigar!smoke. I have had enough of your fragile, lily-looking creatures, who think of nothing but your money and your title, and don't return you ordinary

civility when you have given them both. I love Agnes Rusherton—there ! the murder's out, Jem, and it's no use denying it. I like the girl all round, and I won't give her up for all the scandal in the world."

"And what's to be the end of it, Mountcarron ? "

"The end of it ? "

"Just so. I do not suppose that Miss Rusherton will be content to go on flirting with you, and spoiling all her chances of marriage to the end of the chapter, will she ? "

"If you imagine it is anything more than a flirtation, Jem, you are very much mistaken. Agnes is not the girl to allow any liberties. She can laugh and talk, and make herself as pleasant as possible, but there it stops. I give you my word for it."

"I can easily believe it without your word, Mountcarron. Miss Rusherton is far too shrewd to throw herself away. It

takes a much simpler and more loving woman to fall for the sake of love. Her power over you would be gone as soon as she did it. She plays a deeper game than that."

"I don't understand your way of talking of the young lady, Jem. You will please to remember she is my friend."

"I will try and remember you think so, but, Mountcarron, let me speak to you freely on this subject. We have always been more like brothers than cousins, and though I acknowledge that in some things I have not behaved as well to you as I ought, believe me, I am truly sorry for any shortcomings in my conduct towards you. And in this matter I sincerely wish to stand your friend, and—and—that of your wife. She feels this business, Mountcarron—she *must* feel it. It lowers her dignity with your own when your name is made the topic of village discussions."

"She has been complaining to you," grumbles the earl.

"Indeed she has not. I mentioned the subject to her first, but, though she denied it, I could see that she is hurt and unhappy about it. Any wife would be. It must wound her vanity, if it does not wound her love. And I ask you again, where will it end?"

Mountcarron is silent, and his cousin goes on :

"You cannot suppose that Miss Rusherton's parents are unaware of the rumours concerning her and yourself. And yet they continue to permit you, a married man, to visit at their house, and pay attentions to their daughter that are the common talk of society. They can have but one end in view, as well as herself, and that is, that your passion may drive you some day to the folly of eloping with her, and marrying her afterwards—should you get free."

"Why, I suppose there is little doubt but I *should* get free," laughs the earl uneasily.

"I don't know about that. I think Lady Mountcarron has more determination beneath her fragile appearance than you give her credit for. But even if it were the case, I trust, for the honour of our name, that you would never stoop so low as to place your coronet on the brow of an underbred and scheming *intriguante*. We may not be faultless as a family, Mountcarron, but for God's sake spare us such a humiliation as that!"

The earl's face grows dark with anger.

"You will have to unsay those words, Brooke, or we shall quarrel. No man shall speak before me of Agnes Rusherton in such terms."

"I will not unsay them," returns Jemmie boldly. "They are true, and everyone but yourself knows it. The woman is simply scheming to secure your title, and she does not care through what dirt she

drags herself to obtain it. You complain of Lady Mountcarron having married you for your rank. I know nothing about that, but if she did, you gained in her a woman that would grace any position. If you force her to divorce you (which seems to be your present ambition), you will put in her stead a countess already dishonoured—whom society will ostracise, and all men despise, and whose object in ensnaring you you will be the first, I fully believe, to discover."

"I have already told you," says the earl angrily, "that I will not have Miss Rusherton's name or motives discussed in this open manner. She is a lady whom I admire and esteem above all others, and no one shall mention her in my hearing who cannot do so with respect."

"Then we must drop the subject," replies Jemmie bluntly, "for I neither admire nor respect her, nor will I say so. And mark my words, Mountcarron, it only requires

some one more eligible than yourself to come in her way to make Agnes Rusherton throw you overboard altogether."

But this supposition is too much for the earl's equanimity, and, with an oath, he turns his ill-favoured gelding sharply round, and rides back to Carronby.

"I'm in a nice plight," thinks Jemmie, as he pursues his way alone. "Gladys refused to say good-bye to me, and now Mount-carron leaves me without a word. This is what comes of trying to set matters straight between them; but I would mind nothing so long as *she* understood my motives, and believed that I was doing my very best for both herself and me."

His dejected attitude and manner soon attract the attention of his sister. She suspects more strongly than ever that the cause of his melancholy is enclosed within the walls of Carronby House; but there is something in Jemmie, although he is so many years younger than herself, that has

always precluded too great a familiarity with his private affairs. So she contents herself by asking him if he found all well at Carronby.

"Very far from well," is his reply. "I think Gladys is seriously ill, Elinor."

"I told you she had greatly altered."

"It is not so much the change in her face and figure, as the weakness she complains of, which seems to me so alarming. Do you remember Marian Summers, Nell?"

"Do you mean the bailiff's daughter who died of spinal disease?"

"Yes. I believe Gladys is going the same way."

"Oh! Jemmie, it is not possible!"

He nods his head, and turns aside.

Lady Renton has the sense to let him recover himself before she resumes the subject:

"I think—I hope you may be mistaken, dear. It takes a scientific eye, you know, to detect the real symptoms of disease. So

many different causes may produce the same effect."

"I know it; but what is Mountcarron about to have allowed that poor child to suffer so long without having medical advice? Elinor, this is a case for your interference. You must insist upon his calling in proper assistance for Gladys, or you must write and inform the Fullers of their daughter's condition."

"Have you not seen Mountcarron to-day? Could you not have mentioned it?" Lady Renton asks wistfully.

"I have seen him; but he was so full of that woman Rusherton, he could talk of nothing else, and we ended by quarrelling over it. It was no time for me to speak of his wife's illness, and indeed, Elinor, I don't think under any circumstances that I am the proper person to do it; but you are a woman, your motives cannot be misconstrued, and, in fact, someone must interfere, or Gladys will die under our very

eyes. I don't think she cares much what happens to her," he adds, in a broken voice.

"Very well, dear. I will drive over to Carronby the first thing to-morrow, and see what I can do about it; but what you say of Mountcarron shocks me! Do you mean to tell me that he speaks openly of his intimacy with Miss Rusherton?"

"*Openly!* He glories in it. He has no shame, no decency in the matter," exclaims her brother indignantly. "He mentioned her in his own stables in such a manner as to set all his grooms grinning. He has made her a present of 'Goldfly,' one of the most valuable horses in his stud. He told me plainly that he loves and admires her beyond any living woman, and that if I couldn't do the same we should quarrel. And so we did. I told him my mind too plainly, and he left me without a word and rode back to Carronby. I firmly believe that he intends to bolt with her, and that,

if something is not done to prevent it, that poor child will be deserted and dishonoured, and our name made a bye-word, before many more weeks are over our heads."

"Oh, Jemmie! he could never be so wicked."

"Nonsense, Elinor! You know that men are just as wicked every day of their lives. And though I have always been good friends with Mountcarron, I have never disguised the truth from myself that he has low proclivities, and that the animal predominates over the intellectual in everything he says and does."

"You said something just now, Jemmie, about preventing it. But, if he will not listen to reason, how is it to be prevented?"

"I don't know. I must think about it. But we won't be disgraced without making an effort on our own behalf."

"Oh, Jemmie!" Elinor whispers with her arms round his neck, "how thankful I am that you have not been subject to such a

temptation. Sometimes I have thought, dear—but there, what matters my foolish thoughts?—I know that my darling boy is too good and honourable at heart to be able seriously to contemplate the commission of such a crime."

Mr. Brooke disengages himself from her embrace, gently, but determinately.

"Please don't think anything at all about me, Nell," he says, with his fair face flushing crimson, "except, indeed, that I am no better or wiser than other men. Rest satisfied with the fact that the temptation has passed me by, and there is no chance of its renewal. You *might* have had to weep over me, but you never shall."

"Thank God!" she murmurs.

"Yes; thank God!" he repeats reverently, "for her dear sake more than for mine. I told you I was cured, Elinor, and I have proved for myself that I am. But, if Mountcarron deserts her—" exclaims

Jemmie, and there stops short, conscious that he has betrayed himself.

"Never mind, dear," says his sister, perceiving his confusion ; " I guessed it long ago."

"It must make you only more kind and gentle with her, Elinor, for she needs it sorely. She has suffered, poor child, as well as I. And I can only stand by, and be her friend."

"It is the noblest thing to do, Jemmie."

"Yes! you are right. And by God's help I will be her friend, and nothing more, whilst this barrier lies between us."

And, stooping down to kiss Lady Renton, he leaves the room.



CHAPTER IV.

“WAR TO THE KNIFE.”

IT is difficult to analyse the feelings of Agnes Rusherton at this period with regard to Lord Mountcarron. That she seriously contemplates and is scheming to achieve her own disgrace is scarcely credible. Jemmie judges her too hardly in that. A woman must be very hardened to arrange her fall. Yet she is the next worst thing to being hardened. She is thoroughly careless as to consequences. She is sufficiently vulgar to feel elation at being singled out by an earl for his especial notice, and in her pride lets all the world guess the secret.

She has become quite used to being

“ chaffed ” by friends of her own standing on her undoubted conquest, and never seems to imagine there is any disgrace attached to it. Lord Mountcarron takes possession of her in the hunting-field as a matter of course, and to meet them walking or riding together in the lanes of Carronby has become too common an occurrence even for remark. Most people indeed believe there is much more than a flirtation between the earl and Miss Rusherton, and wonder among themselves how long the Countess intends to stand the indignity without taking notice of it.

But Miss Rusherton’s parents know the contrary. They have too much faith in their daughter’s worldly wisdom to believe her capable of throwing herself away for nothing.

The father is an avaricious grasping old mill-owner, the mother something too common for description. “ Aggie ” (as she is familiarly called by them) is a great im-

provement both in culture and appearance on her progenitors, and they see and acknowledge it.

They would be very much shocked if she were the mistress of even an earl, but if she can manage to become a countess they would condone any means by which she accomplished it. They think she is quite fit to be a countess—much fitter indeed than that pale, thin girl up at Carronby House, who has (as Mrs. Rusherton expresses it) “no figger and no style and nothink. And if the worst came to the worst,” the old woman continues to her husband, “our Aggie will have plenty of fine ladies rowing in the same boat with her. Why the papers is full of dooks and countesses in the Divorce Court now-a-days, and I don’t see as they’re much worse off than others. It’s true as Her Majesty won’t receive ’em at Court, but that can’t be no great loss, when Buckingham Palace is never opened from one year’s end to

another and Windsor Castle is hung with black from garret to basement."

"Don't you talk foolish," replies Mr. Rusherton, "our Aggie ain't going to manage matters that way."

"What way can she manage 'em then? You can't get out of the hearl being married."

"True enough, but from what Aggie tells me the countess ain't quite as particular as she might be—and has her likes and dislikes as well as other people. It would be a grand move if they'd open fire on the other side, eh, old lady?"

"Well, I don't know," says Mrs. Rusherton reflectively. "There don't seem to be much chance of that. Why, my lady hasn't the pluck for such a thing. I met her out driving yesterday, and she looks as white and as thin as a ghost. Much more like dying than running away. And who's the gentleman, pray?"

"Young Mr. Brooke, of Nutley—the earl's

cousin, you know. He was always at Car-ronby before he went away, and they was as thick as thieves. And now he's come back, Aggie says he's as sweet on the countess as ever. Let alone Aggie for finding out the truth. I bet she's right. And if anything happens there, it will pave the way nicely for our girl, won't it now?"

"I don't know," replies his wife again. "The hearl might alter his mind if he was free. Men is so fickle in love matters. And as for Mr. Brooke, I thought he was 'gone' on our Aggie last year. He rode home with her several times from the hunting field. I wouldn't mind that match for her, Rusherton. He's an '*honourable*,' mind you; and if anything happens to the hearl, he's the presumptuous heir. No family yet, you see, and no signs of any. And his lordship ain't a long-lived man to my thinking. He's too stout and heavy for his age. After all, I'd rather see Aggie

take to the young feller. It would be more certain and respectable like."

"Oh! you go along and leave Aggie to manage her own affairs. She'll fall on her feet, trust her for that. She's the cleverest and pluckiest girl that ever stept in shoe-leather. And the earl—and everybody else for the matter of that—will have to keep their distance as long as she thinks fit. She's much better able to take care of herself than we are to take care of her."

In which statement Mr. Rusherton is perfectly correct. Agnes requires no Mentor to point out the way to her. She has made up her mind on the subject, and no counsel would have the power to turn her from it. For the present, Lord Mountcarron is her devoted slave, and she intends him to remain so. Each day he is becoming more entangled in the net she has woven around him, and she is proud to see it. What the consequences may be to *him*, if she ever throws him over, she considers as little as

she cares. She knows that, as far as *she* is concerned, she can always take refuge behind her virtue when she has had enough of his attentions. But there is no doubt that the idea which is discussed by her parents has also crossed her own mind. She often asks herself what she shall do if (as Mrs. Rusherton puts it) "the worst comes to the worst." Not whether she shall consent to the earl's importunities, but how she shall secure his pledge to marry her when he has the liberty to do so. She has no faith in his protestations or his honour—nor much (truth to say) in his love. She is clever enough to read the man just as he is, and is quite determined not to ruin all her prospects in life on the strength of his word. He will have to make a suitable settlement on her—she thinks—before she listens to any proposals on his part. She cannot bind him down to marry her, but she can make him part with that which will prevent his marrying anybody else, and

which he will be ready to secure to himself, even at the price of making her his wife. This is Miss Rusherton's little scheme in case "the worst comes to the worst."

And meanwhile she will accept the earl's horses, and flowers, and fruit, and all the other good things he lavishes on her, and see if a little patience, and the rumours which are flying round the country concerning her, may not have the effect of causing her rival to make the first false move in this game of intrigue. Agnes Rusherton is musing after this fashion one afternoon, in her drawing-room, when Mr. Brooke's card is put into her hand. She is both surprised and pleased by its reception. She has always been a great admirer of Jemmie, and there was a time when their acquaintanceship looked very like a serious flirtation. She is just the sort of woman that men will flirt—and *only* flirt—with. Her fine eyes are full of invitation, her smile is conscious, every line of her developed figure expresses

boldness and determination. As she stands in her drawing-room this afternoon, clad in a tight-fitting blue dress, with a profusion of white lace about her throat and wrists, and her abundant hair piled on the top of her head, she looks dashing and handsome, full of life and vigour, full of everything, indeed, except the qualities characteristic of a gentlewoman.

It is essentially *her* drawing-room, for her father is away all day on business, and her mother is never comfortable anywhere except in her own element—the kitchen, and the company it contains. So that the daughter of the house has it all her own way with respect to receiving visitors, and can always be certain of an uninterrupted interview with her favourites. As she receives Jemmie's card she positively blushes with pleasure. He has been so cool to her lately that she did not think he would call, and she accepts the visit as a sort of concession on his part, a kind of

recognition of their future relationship. She admits him to her presence without delay, and meets him with an outstretched hand of welcome. Jemmie hates the hand, more because he doesn't know how to refuse it than for any other reason. He is feeling very nervous over the approaching interview, for he has made up his mind to speak openly to this girl, whatever comes of it. Some days have passed since the incidents described in the last chapter, and he has seen nothing of Gladys nor Mountcarron. He feels as if he were shut out of Carronby for the first time in his life, although he knows it is his own fault for not going there as usual. But he cannot take Mountcarron's hand just yet. He has been pondering over the vexed question of Miss Rusherton, day and night, wondering what he can do in the matter, when suddenly it has occurred to him to speak to the young lady herself. Not openly or coarsely—that would be beyond his

province as a gentleman or a relation of the earl, and altogether beyond his power as a man. All he thinks of doing is to renew his acquaintance with Miss Rusherton, and make her understand (as opportunity may offer itself) that no misbehaviour on the part of her husband will induce the Countess of Mountcarron to set him free. He believes—and rightly—that the whole aim of this girl's attack upon the earl will be defeated if she thinks she has no hope of standing in Gladys' place. And so, notwithstanding that he cordially dislikes and despises her, his greeting is as friendly as if no antagonism existed between them.

And Agnes is so flattered by his appearance that she forgets or forgives the coolness with which he met her in the hunting-field.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Brooke," she says, as they shake hands.

"I regret you should think so, Miss

Rusherton. Did you imagine I should be long in Nutley without calling to ask how you were?"

"I should have been sorry if it had been the case, but I am afraid I should not have been surprised. The best of friends forget one so soon in this world, and you have been such a long time away."

"Yes; I have travelled half over the world since we parted, but twice that time would not have made me forget you."

"You're awfully good to say so; for I confess I thought you didn't know who I was when we met last week on the Downs."

Jemmie blushes, but is not to be worsted. What man is at a loss for an excuse when a handsome woman throws her glance right in his face.

"Can you make no allowance for the disappointment of a fellow, who comes home after a long absence, to find his place filled by another? There *was* a time, I

think, Miss Rusherton, and not so very long ago either, when it was *my* happy privilege to be your cavalier in the hunting-field. But, doubtless, you have forgotten that?"

"Oh, dear, no! I haven't forgotten it by any manner of means," she says, tossing her head; "but if you go off to the other side of the world you mustn't be surprised to find that somebody else has been fulfilling your duty in your absence. Would you have been so selfish as to wish me to ride by myself during all these months, Mr. Brooke?"

"I can hardly say what I wish or do not wish. Duty called me from England, and I was compelled to obey."

"*Duty!* was it? Well, there have been half a dozen different stories floating about Carronby with respect to your absence, Mr. Brooke; but then, you know what a scandalous little place it is. Some people said you had had a disappointment in love

at home; and others that you followed a lady out to India, and was engaged to her there. Now, which is true?"

"The first, of course. Hadn't you begun to snub me even before I started?"

"Lor! Mr Brooke! what an idea. And it isn't true, either. You know you lost your heart long ago in quite another direction."

"Indeed! this is news to me. But you must not confound me with my cousin Mountcarron, Miss Rusherton; I am not so susceptible as he is."

The shaft tells. Agnes reddens over brow and bosom as she asks confusedly:

"Is Lord Mountcarron so very susceptible, then?"

"Terribly so. Can't you see what a flirt he is? He is always in some scrape or other. I had hoped that his marriage would sober him," continues Jemmie, in a low and confidential voice; "but I have heard

some very unpleasant rumours since my return that have annoyed me and my sister, Lady Renton, exceedingly."

Miss Rusherton is scarlet as she replies :

"You musn't believe everything that you hear in Carronby. People invent stories here for the sake of something to do. If you only knew what they have said about *you*, Mr. Brooke."

"But it does not signify what they say about *me*. I am a bachelor, and can bear the brunt of fifty scandals—true or false. But my cousin is differently situated. He is a married man, and if Lady Mountcarron's family elect to take notice of these reports (which is very probable) it is likely to go hard with him."

"Have the Fullers heard the stories you speak of?" demands Agnes nervously. "I confess *I* never have. I have never heard the earl spoken of but in terms of the highest respect."

"Naturally *you* would not, Miss Rusher-

ton. Carronby knows that you honour Mountcarron with your friendship, and therefore you would be one of the last persons before whom it would venture to traduce him."

"Well, I believe the earl *does* look upon me as a friend," she says bridling, "and of course I would not allow anyone to abuse him in my presence."

"I am sure you would not, and, being his friend, I think you might save him from so much annoyance, Miss Rusherton. A man will take advice from a woman that he would resent from one of his own sex. Perhaps you are surprised that I should suggest such a thing to you instead of Lady Mountcarron, but I need not tell you that if the earl and countess were on the terms that a husband and wife ought to be there would be no cause given for scandal on his part."

"I really don't know what rumours you are alluding to, Mr. Brooke. I have already

told you that *I* have not heard any, nor have my papa or mama. Papa has the very highest opinion of Lord Mountcarron, and considers him one of the most elegant gentleman he has ever met."

"There is no doubt, unfortunately, that unpleasant rumours *are* afloat concerning him, for Lady Renton informed me of them the first day I returned. She tells me all the villagers are aware of the fact that he is making open love to some girl or other round about here, and that it is the talk of the neighbourhood. I cannot find out the name of the woman, but I conclude it must be some farmer's or tradesman's daughter. No educated person would be such a fool as to imagine that the attentions of a married nobleman could mean anything but ruin for her."

"If the young lady is of such low extraction there can be no danger to your cousin from the acquaintanceship," says Miss Rusherton shrewdly.

"*Danger ! no !* . If you mean the danger of being entrapped into marrying her, *that* would be an impossibility under any circumstances were the woman a peeress or a peasant."

"How *impossible* ? I don't follow you," says Agnes, betraying herself by her anxiety, "If the countess divorced him he could marry anyone he liked. Marriages like that take place constantly, even amongst the aristocracy, do they not ?"

Jemmie's opportunity has arrived.

"Yes ; *if* she divorced him," he answers deliberately ; "only *she wouldn't*."

Miss Rusherton starts, but checks herself :

"Why wouldn't she ? It's the ordinary thing."

"Perhaps ; but Lady Mountcarron is not an ordinary woman ; and were she even inclined to act in an ordinary way, her family and Mountcarron's family would not permit her to do so."

"It's a funny idea for a family to inter-

fere between the private quarrels of a husband and wife."

"Do you think so? *We* don't. You see, Miss Rusherton; there are *some* families who value their honour more than their blood. To be obliged to acknowledge that my cousin, who is the head of our family, one of the highest and oldest in England, does *not* is a very great shame and disappointment to us all. But I regret to say that, from a lad, he has never entertained a proper sense of his responsibilities, and has always had a hankering after company inferior to his own. This is why we fear what he may be led into. But one thing he shall never have whilst Lady Mountcarron lives to prevent it, and that is—his freedom."

"Dear me! you seem to feel very strongly on the matter, Mr. Brooke. And yet I should have thought it was the very thing you would like to see come to pass."

Jemmie guesses the spite that dic-

tates this speech; but he meets it with boldness :

“ *Why?* ”

“ Oh! I don’t know, I’m sure,” replies Agnes tittering; “ only—only—I am told the countess is considered such a beauty; and—there would be a chance for you then, you know.”

At this his brow darkens.

“ Excuse me, Miss Rusherton, but I am not partial to jests on such a subject. I introduced it in order to secure your good offices on behalf of my cousin. He does not make many friends, but you are evidently one. He may have confided the history of this love affair to you. If not, he may yet do so. When he does, if you entertain any feelings of friendship for him, pray make him understand plainly that he will *never* get his liberty from Lady Mountcarron. He may sink to the lowest depths of infamy, but she will not divorce him. Her friends will not permit it. We will have no other

woman, were she the highest in the realm, put in her place. We are too proud to suffer a disgraced countess to wear our coronet. The earl may sully his own name, but he shall not put an everlasting stain on our posterity. And the countess feels all this as keenly as we do. She comes of blood as good and pure as our own, and understands what she owes to the position she has accepted. All that Mountcarron can achieve by any act of folly, into which he may be led, or driven, is the ruin of the woman who is foolish enough to trust to him and his own disgrace. It shall never touch—even by reflection—the brow of his injured wife."

"You are quite a champion of her ladyship's, Mr. Brooke," says Miss Rusherton, with a sneer.

"I am; I shall always be so. And I hope you will prove to be an equal friend to the earl."

"I really don't see that I shall have any

opportunity, and I think it is rather strange of you to ask me such a thing. If his lordship *has* any low love affair, which, as I told you, *I* have never heard, I don't think he is very likely to confide it to *me*. I should hope he has too much respect for me to mention such a thing in my presence. I am sure my papa would be very angry if he heard he had done so."

"Doubtless. But you know, Miss Rusherton, whether right or wrong, we *do* talk of things sometime in this naughty world that our papas would be very angry to hear of. And if this subject *should* crop up between you and Mountcarron—I only say if it *should*, remember—you will not forget to tell him just what I have said, will you?"

"And am I at liberty to quote you as my authority, Mr. Brooke?"

"Certainly, if the matter *should* crop up," he repeats significantly. "Whatever he does, he will never get a divorce from Lady

Mountcarron. If I knew the name of his *inamorata* I would go and tell her so myself. It is only fair that she should be warned, poor girl, of the dangerous risk she runs."

Miss Rusherton understands him as plainly as if he had spoken to her in the first person instead of introducing a fictitious woman to her notice. She is trembling with rage and mortification, but she dares not let him see it. She rises from her seat, and professes to be occupied with the arrangement of a stand of flowers (newly imported from the Carronby hothouses), but her hands shake as they wander amongst the blossoms and leaves.

Jemmie follows her. He has accomplished his object, but he has no wish to declare open war.

"You are not offended with my plain speaking I hope, dear Miss Rusherton?" he says insinuatingly.

"Offended! Oh, dear, no! Why should I be? It is nothing to *me*, you know, if the earl gets a divorce or not."

"I am aware of that. But I thought that a clever woman like yourself, and—forgive me for saying—so fascinating a one, might venture to give the poor old boy a warning without hurting his feelings, where a clumsy brute like myself would only put my foot in it, and do no good. I am sure that Mountcarron thinks so highly of your good sense and friendship."

"Well, if I should ever have the opportunity I will mention it, but I think it very unlikely, Mr. Brooke."

"I thank you so much for the promise, Miss Rusherton. And if that lucky fellow, Mountcarron, does not intend to monopolise you altogether, may I hope, occasionally, to be your escort out riding or in the field, as I used to be in the dear old days of old?"

“I am not quite sure whether you deserve it, and still less whether you care about it. I am afraid you’re a terrible humbug, Mr. Brooke! You have upset me altogether with these unpleasant stories. I hope you will never mention them to me again. I feel so much naturally for the poor countess and—and—the earl that I would much rather hear nothing about it at all.”

“It shall be my last offence,” says Jemmie, “and as a proof that you forgive it you will give me one of those flowers for my button-hole, won’t you? One of those pink ones. They are especial favourites of mine. They have several plants of them at Carronby House, and the gardener there boasts that they came from Japan, and he is the only person in England that has raised them. I shall tell him of his mistake, and take down his conceit next time we meet. He will be astonished to hear that you have so fine a specimen.”

He looks her in the face as he concludes, and she is compelled to say with affected indifference.

“Oh, he must know all about it, for it was Lord Mountcarron that gave me the plant. He knows that I love rare flowers. Wasn't it good of him?”

“Not half good enough for you,” returns Mr. Brooke gallantly, as he places the blossom she gives him in his coat. They part therefore on apparently good terms, but the woman knows as well as if he had told it her that the reason he came there that afternoon was to annihilate any hopes she might entertain of becoming the Countess of Mountcarron. She looks after him as he walks past the drawing-room window on his way out, with flashing eyes and a countenance dark with anger.

“So that is their little game, is it?” she says to herself. “Well, I think I know of another to play against it. The earl is not to get a divorce. That is spite against *me*.”

Perhaps we can manage it the other way, which will be much the better plan and see if her ladyship cannot be caught tripping with her dear cousin, Mr. Brooke. I know he was in love with her before he left Carronby. Every servant in the house knew of it. And it's pretty sure to come on again. I have only to wait my time and set Mountcarron on the right track. I flatter myself I didn't shew my hand too plainly this afternoon, but I'll have my revenge on you for this, Mr. Brooke, if I wait ten years for it."



CHAPTER V.

“THE VERDICT.”

LADY RENTON takes an early opportunity to call at Carronby House, but before she sees the earl she asks for Lady Mountcarron, and Gladys' maid is summoned to give an account of her mistress.

“Her ladyship is very poorly—very poorly indeed—and has been so for the last three days. She is lying down in her boudoir, but of course she will see your ladyship, if your ladyship will please to walk up.”

“It alarms me to find how ill she is, Parsons, and I'm afraid she doesn't take sufficient care of herself. When did this weakness first come on?”

"Well, I can hardly tell your ladyship ; but I *observed* it first during the London season. My mistress used to complain of her back after dancing ; but still she would dance, you know, though often and often I've begged her to spare herself, but she seemed as if she couldn't rest. And it's gone on from bad to worse, till it's pitiful to see her. I'm sure it makes my heart ache to see what she suffers. And she won't have no advice, my lady, neither."

"She *must* have advice," replies Elinor decisively, "and it is for that reason I am here to-day, Parsons. Lady Mountcarron will be an invalid for life if she is not more careful. I intend to speak to the earl about it."

"Ah ! his lordship is the proper person to see after her, and I've said so from the very first ; but, my lady, I hope you'll forgive my freedom—perhaps, as a servant, it isn't my place to speak, but still, we have our eyes and our ears, and there are some

things as no doctor can cure. If you could only hear that sweet soul at night, my lady—since she's been took with these faints I've slept in her dressing-room to be at hand when required, and many an hour I've laid awake listening to her sobbing, which is fit to melt a heart of stone, poor sweet, young thing," concludes Parsons, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear she is low-spirited; but you must remember, Parsons, that it is a consequence of the disease. There is nothing so depressing as constant pain. As soon as we have cured her back, we shall see her cheerfulness return. And now, if she is ready to see me, I will go upstairs."

Although Lady Renton has made light of the maid's report, she is very much shocked when she encounters Gladys.

The girl seems to have shrunk to half her size since their last meeting. Her eyes are surrounded by deep violet rings, and her

face is white as the dressing-gown in which she lies upon the sofa. She smiles faintly as Elinor enters the room, but the tears stand on her cheeks as she does so.

"Why, my dear child, how is this?" exclaims Lady Renton cheerily, and feigning not to see her emotion. "Why do I find you on the sofa? Are you in such pain, dear Gladys?"

"Sometimes, not always; but I am so weak, Elinor, I don't want to get up."

"You must have advice at once, Gladys. I have come over to speak to Mountcarron about it."

"Do you think it will be of any use?"

"*Any use*, you silly girl! Why, you don't fancy you are dying, do you? You are a little tougher than you give yourself credit for. You have over-fatigued yourself, Gladys—danced and ridden when you ought to have been resting, and you have strained some muscle in the back. Tonics and rest are all you require, dear. When

the doctor has given his orders, we must see that you attend to them, and we shall soon have you yourself again."

"Tonics and rest will never cure me," says Gladys, turning her face away.

"My dear girl," replies Elinor, laying her hand upon Gladys's, "I know that they cannot cure the ills of life; but if they restore your bodily health, they will give you more strength to bear them bravely, and as a Christian woman should. We all have our troubles, Gladys. Look at me! I married a man who was devoted to me, and I lost him five years afterwards. My life has been very blank to me since then. Were it not for Jemmie and my little Hugh it would be empty; but I have to live on and bear it. We all have."

"But I—" says Gladys with a trembling lip—"I— have *nothing*."

"Oh, yes you have darling! You have your dear parents who love you so dearly, and your sister, Mrs. Prendergast. And I

daresay, that, by and by Gladys, God will send you a nearer and dearer comfort, in a child of your own, that will console you for everything, as my little Hugh has consoled me."

"Oh, no, no!" cries Gladys shuddering, "I don't want it. I will not have it! Anything but that! I am far better as I am, *alone*."

"Oh, Gladys, don't say that, dear! You do not know—you cannot tell—the blessing a little child might bring to you."

"Never as I am now, Elinor. Don't speak of it. You do not know me! You cannot guess my thoughts. If you did, perhaps you would not be sitting here now."

"The more unhappy you are, dear child, the more need you have of my presence and my sympathy. Don't turn from me Gladys. I would gladly lighten your burden, if I could."

"There is no cure for my pain," says

Lady Mountcarron sadly. "I have brought it on myself. I must bear it by myself, and as well as I can."

"You must have more company," returns Lady Renton cheerfully, "you are moping too much, shut up in this dull room alone. Could not your sister Mrs. Prendergast come to you for a few weeks, till you are strong again?"

"No! she cannot leave home. She has a baby of a few days old."

"Then your father and mother. They certainly ought to be apprised of your condition."

"Oh, no, no!" cries Gladys feverishly, "don't tell my dad, whatever you do! He would be so unhappy to see me like this. His life is sad enough as it is and he thinks so much of me. And he warned me, he warned me so against this marriage," she continues wildly, "he said I didn't love Mountcarron, he begged me to consider, he told me——"

"There—there, hush, dear," interposes Lady Renton, fearful of the effect that excitement may have on Gladys' weakened condition. "Don't talk of that now. I know—of course I cannot help seeing—that your marriage is not entirely a happy or sympathetic one, but things may come right yet, Gladys, and we cannot make them better by discussion. Try and calm yourself, dear! The very first thing to be done is, to procure proper medical advice for you, and when your health is restored, it will be time to think of curing the other trouble."

"It will never be cured. How *can* it be?" says Lady Mountcarron despondently.

"To say that is to doubt the power and the goodness of God, my dear! However I know you are not in a fit state to argue the matter now. Try and hope for the best, and remember how many friends you have who love you, and will never cease to love you, whatever happens."

. She leaves Gladys, apparently calmer but with a look of abject despair upon her lovely countenance. Lady Renton knows why that look is there, and it makes her heart bleed. She is a good pure woman herself, but the sin is not half so present with her as the sorrow that these two young hearts, Gladys' and Jemmie's,—are passing through at this moment. She does not presume to judge them. She feels that the Creator, who made their hearts so susceptible and so weak, is pitying them far more than He condemns, and her object through life is to try and follow His example.

As soon as she has quitted Lady Mountcarron's presence, she goes in search of the earl, and finds him, luckily, at home. Her strictures on his carelessness, with regard to his wife, are so much severer than either General Fuller's or Mr. Brooke's, that Mountcarron is completely taken aback. He hardly recognises his gentle cousin,

Elinor, in the woman who goes straight to the point, and does not spare him one iota of the blame.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mountcarron," she exclaims, "to have let that poor child suffer as she has done, for weeks and months, without calling in medical advice for her! There is not a servant in the house who does not see how ill she is! Oh, don't tell me that Gladys has not confided in you! When have you ever invited her confidence? And do you, for the matter of that, deserve it? It was your business, as her husband and protector, to have found out that she was ill. Anyone can see it. The most careless eye cannot light upon her face and figure, without knowing she is ill. And you say you waited to be told? You are a nice person to have the charge of a young delicate girl, I must say——"

"Really, Nell, you quite take my breath away, with this attack. Of course, I will

have a doctor for Lady Mountcarron, if it is necessary. Shall I send for Chambers?"

"Certainly not! what should Dr. Chambers know of spinal disease? You must write to London for a specialist—Sir Francis Cardwell will do, or Mr. Boone. Any one, so long as he is a first-rate authority."

"Cannot you write for me?"

"No! you are the proper person to do it. Here are pens and paper! Sit down and write to Sir Francis at once, and ask him to name the earliest date he can to visit Carronby. It will be a nice thing if the story of your neglect gets to the ears of the Fullers. Enough to make a man take his daughter back again, I should think. At least, I know that is what I should feel about it."

"But I assure you I had no idea she was *really* ill," says the earl, as he transcribes the note to Sir Francis.

"More shame for you then! I tell you that she is very ill indeed, and requires the

utmost care. I suppose you don't want to have her on her back a chronic invalid for the rest of her life, Mountcarron? But that will be the end of it, if it is not taken in time. And Heaven only knows how much of this is due to your conduct to her, and how much is not "

"I think you're deuced hard upon me, Elinor," says the earl ruefully; "I'm sure I don't know what I've done so much out of the way. I've never refused my wife anything she asked for, and I've given her every liberty and indulgence possible."

"And taken the same yourself, by all accounts," exclaims Lady Renton sharply. "However, I have no wish to discuss the matter further. Is your letter ready? Let me put it into the mail bag. I shall have no peace of mind until I know it is on its road to London. Good-bye!" And with a curt word of farewell, Lady Renton seizes the letter, and walks out of the room.

Lord Mountcarron is so startled by this

interview, that the next thing he does is to go to his wife's boudoir and ask for admittance. His appearance is so unusual, that the maid who admits him, cannot conceal her surprise.

"Lor! it's his lordship, my lady! his lordship has come to see you!"

"Let him come in," says Gladys, languidly.

Mountcarron walks awkwardly up to the sofa and perceives (perhaps for the first time) how very much changed she is in face and figure.

"Elinor's been talking about you to me," he begins, clumsily, "and I'm awfully sorry to hear you're so ill. Why didn't you tell me of it before?"

"If you couldn't see it, it wasn't worth while telling you of it, Mountcarron."

"Well—but what is the row with you?"

"O, nothing, thank you. Nothing of any consequence. Only a little headache. I shall be well to-morrow."

"But Elinor declares you're very bad, and has made me write for Sir Francis Cardwell. It will look very funny when he takes the trouble to come here, if he should find there's nothing the matter with you."

"I have no doubt he will manage to find something. Doctors generally do."

"Well I daresay he will come to-morrow or next day. I told him to telegraph. Can I do anything for you, meanwhile?"

"Nothing, thank you. Pray go back to your own friends. I know you hate a sick room."

"If I can't do anything for you," replies the earl, dubiously——

"Nothing. Parsons attends to me perfectly well. I only want rest and quiet."

"Good-bye for the present, then," he says, as he rises, without attempting to kiss her, "and as soon as ever I get the telegram from Sir Francis, I will send you word."

"Thank you," she reiterates, indifferently, and then the door closes behind him, and

Mountcarron (considering that has done his duty) goes downstairs again, and orders his horse to ride with Miss Rusherton. On the third day, the great doctor arrives from London, and makes a minute examination of Gladys' spine. He enquires into all the symptoms, and receives a detailed account from Parsons, of the pain her lady has suffered, and the fainting fits which follow it. Sir Francis is more than cheerful in the boudoir. He is almost jocose as he laughs at the servant's long face, and pooh-poohs the idea of danger, and declares that a few weeks of care will see Lady Mountcarron as strong as ever.

But as he descends to the library to interview the earl, his face tells a different tale. He enters the room in solemn silence and busies himself in reassuming his great coat and mufflers.

"Well, Sir Francis, and what is the verdict?" exclaims the earl.

"Her ladyship is young, my lord —

just twenty she tells me—and youth is everything in her favour. But I regret to say I detect grave symptoms in her case. There is decided mischief to the spine. There seems to have been a constitutional delicacy from the first, and it has been aggravated by extreme carelessness and over fatigue. Her ladyship will have to preserve the recumbent position for some weeks—in fact, for the present altogether. I cannot say more now. If you desire it, I will see Lady Mountcarron again in a month's time, when I shall be better able to form a decided opinion. But you must see that she keeps strictly to the sofa. No dancing—no walking—no riding. No rising at all, in fact, except to go backwards and forwards to her bed. Her ladyship tells me she intends to go to town for the season. She must not *think* of it. If you value her health, my lord—I may say, her *life*—you will see that my orders are strictly carried out."

"I suppose you've told all this to her maid?" says Mountcarron.

"Yes. I had a long talk with her, and she seems an intelligent person. But I need hardly remind your lordship that servants, however good, are not always the most reliable people in a serious case like the present. Has Lady Mountcarron no female relative who could come to her in this emergency?"

"Oh, yes; plenty. But my wife is rather obstinate in such matters, and likes to have her own way. However, I will see, Sir Francis, that your instructions are faithfully carried out. And when you consider it necessary to see your patient again, I trust you will send us word, and everything shall be in readiness to receive you. I hope you will lunch before you return."

"Thanks, but I have no time. I must catch the one o'clock train back to London, as I have an important operation to per-

form at four. Keep up her ladyship's spirits, my lord. She seems a little nervous about herself to me, and nothing militates against recovery like depression. Many thanks."

And the great man puts a cheque for fifty pounds into his pocket, and steps into the carriage that is waiting to convey him back to the station.



CHAPTER VI.

“ROSES AND THORNS.”

THE fiat has gone forth. Gladys, at twenty years of age, with the means of procuring every luxury and pleasure which money or the world can afford her, is condemned to give up everything and to lie on her back until such time as the medical men shall give her leave to rise.

Lord Mountcarron does not disguise the truth. Sir Francis Cardwell humanely withheld it from so young a creature, thinking it would be hard enough to bear when the repetition of disappointed hope and realised fear had made it patent to her.

But the earl has no such weak scruples.

Before the physician has been gone an hour he has blurted it out in his clumsy way, with the unnecessary addition, that now she's made a d—d fool of herself, he hopes she's satisfied. Lady Mountcarron hears the news in utter silence. She is too unhappy just then to care what happens to her. If she is sorry at all, it is because she is not going to die at once. A lingering illness, she thinks, will be very trying. But at all events, it will keep Mountcarron away. He is not likely to trouble a sick room with his presence. And Gladys lays her weary young head down on her pillows, and thinks that there is balm in Gilead. Of course, her people have to be written to. The earl feels it is impossible to conceal the fact of his wife's illness from them any longer, but Gladys pleads to be allowed to send the news herself, and he leaves the task to her. She makes very light of it indeed. She has strained a muscle in her back from over exertion, and the doctor

has ordered her to keep to her sofa for a few weeks.

Her sister Winifred has a newly-born little daughter and cannot leave home, and her darling dad is suffering from a slight attack of gout. She therefore begs her mother not to dream of leaving the two invalids for her sake, and it is finally settled that when General Fuller is able to travel, her parents shall spend a few weeks with her at Carronby.

So the girl lies on her sofa, white as the snow that is falling outside her windows, and with a constant heartache that nothing will allay. Each day her maid brings her a bouquet of flowers that has been left for her at the door. Sometimes it is a cluster of early snowdrops—sometimes a bunch of rich, fragrant violets, or a few sprays of rose-tinted cyclamen—but it is always accompanied by the same message: “Mr. Brooke’s love, my lady, and he would like to know how your ladyship feels to-day.”

And the answer that goes back is always the same: "My kind regards, Parsons, and I am just the same."

But Parsons sees and understands the vivid flush that mounts to her mistress's pale cheek as she takes the blossoms, though she never witnesses the hot tears which Gladys sheds over them, nor hears the rebellious cry that goes up from her heart: "O! my darling; my own, *own* darling; the only thing I valued in this world. Why have you ceased to love me?"

Lady Renton comes to see her frequently, but her visits generally leave Gladys worse instead of better. She means well, but she holds the old-fashioned notion that the best way to expurgate an unlawful love is to stamp upon it, never mind if the heart that cherishes it breaks in the process. She pities Gladys and Jemmie from the bottom of her soul—pities them for the sorrow as well as the sin—and she thinks the kindest

thing she can do is to cure them both, as soon as she can, of their unfortunate attachment. So she will not give Lady Mountcarron the poor satisfaction of thinking that her lover shares her regret, but mentions Jemmie always in a jaunty and off-hand manner, as if he were perfectly free from care.

"What spirits that boy has," she says one day, in alluding to her brother. "What between him and Hughie I feel almost worn out. They are like two children together. But Jemmie is not much more than a child, after all."

"He will be twenty-five next birthday," murmurs Lady Mountcarron.

"So he will. How time flies. It seems but yesterday that he was a little boy in petticoats. Well, a great deal depends on Jemmie. He is—after Mountcarron—the only male representative of our family, and I should like to see him safely and happily married."

"He may be the earl yet," says Gladys, with a faint smile. "*I* am not likely to have a family."

"O! my dear girl, don't talk of such a thing. You don't know what blessings may not be in store for you when you get strong and well again. Still, if it *should* be so, of course we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that Jemmie is the next heir, and his children may succeed to the title."

Gladys closes her eyes and shudders.

"Are you faint, dear?" cries Lady Renton.

"No. It was only a spasm. But, as you say, Elinor, Mr. Brooke ought certainly to marry. It is a pity he did not take that beautiful Miss Temple at Calcutta."

"She is coming home with her father next month," exclaims Lady Renton. "We only heard it yesterday, and Jem is sure to meet her during the season."

"Ah! and I shall not be there," cries Gladys, with a sudden burst of tears.

“My dear girl, do you regret it as much as that? Indeed, Gladys, that is not worthy of you. Dancing and such pleasures are all very well in their way, but if we allow them to monopolise our affections——”

“It is not the dancing, although I love it,” sobs Lady Mountcarron. “It is the thought of not being able to meet my friends.”

“But I thought that General and Mrs. Fuller were to come here in May—Mountcarron told me so—and your sister will doubtless visit you as soon as she is able. How is she getting on?”

“O! all right, I believe.”

“And the dear little baby. It is a girl, this time, is it not? What is she to be called?”

“I don’t know. I never asked.”

“What does Mrs. Prendergast say to such a lack of interest on your part?”

“What should she say? She knows I hate babies—nasty flabby little things. I

never touched Arthur till he was a year old."

"But that is very unwomanly, my dear Gladys. If God should ever make you a mother—"

"O, Elinor, don't worry me about it for Heaven's sake! I don't want to be a mother. Let Jemmie's children succeed to the title. The sooner I am dead and gone the better."

And Lady Renton, finding that the emotion that follows this remark is beyond her powers of quelling, leaves the girl to herself and wonders why her visits always seem to upset her so.

One day, about a week after the doctor's orders have been issued, the bouquet of flowers—Christmas roses this time, with their pure white waxen petals and hearts of gold—is accompanied by a different message, "Mr. Brooke's love, my lady, and if you feel well enough he would be glad to see you for a few minutes this afternoon."

Gladys' answer is a purely feminine one.

"O, Parsons!" she exclaims. "How does my hair look?"

"Beautiful, my lady. It couldn't look nicer. Here, let me put this white wrap over your feet, and give you a clean handkerchief. There now, I'm sure you are a perfect picture. And, is Mr. Brooke to be shewn up, my lady?"

"O, yes, if he wishes it. And, it's about time for your tea isn't it, Parsons?"

"Yes, my lady; and with your leave I'll take it while Mr. Brooke is here," replies the maid discreetly. In another minute she ushers Jemmie into the room, and they are together again. Gladys does not raise her eyes from the contemplation of her Christmas roses. She knows he is standing beside her sofa, but she dare not look at him. It is not till he has drawn a chair towards her, and sat down, and taken her hand, and said in a low voice "Gladys," that two tears stealing down her pale cheeks,

betoken that she is aware of his presence. It is the first time they have met since the interview in the library.

"Well, you see what I've come to, Jemmie," she answers, trying to speak lightly. "Condemned to be here for the rest of my natural existence. A pleasant prospect, isn't it, to know that everything in life is over at twenty years of age?"

And she makes a violent effort to swallow the hysterical ball that has risen in her throat.

"My dear girl, it is not as bad as that. Your fears exaggerate the evil. A few weeks, or, at the most, a few months, will see you strong and well again."

"You say that to comfort me; but I know better. Mountcarron told me exactly what the doctor said—that there is decided mischief to my spine, and though I have youth in my favour, it is a very serious case. I know what that means, Jemmie. A life spent on this sofa until

death releases me. Oh! how I wish it could come to-day!" she exclaims, sobbing.

"Gladys, Gladys, do you know how you are distressing me?"

"It won't be for long. You will soon get over it. Elinor said the other day that you must marry, that you owed it to your family to do so—and I say so, too. For you will be the Earl of Mountcarron some day, Jemmie, there is no doubt of that, and your children after you."

He does not answer—he is too distressed to speak—and she goes on rapidly :

"I am glad you came up this afternoon. I want to tell you that I see now that what you said the last time we met is quite right. It was madness! It is a very good thing it was prevented. Fancy, if I had been on your hands at this moment, how you would have hated me!"

"I could never hate you under any circumstances, Gladys."

He is fighting with himself as the gladiators of old fought for their lives in the Roman arena, and at each word he utters his life-blood seems to ooze from him drop by drop. He wants to say so much; but he dares not give the rein to his desires. He cannot tell where they will carry him, of what folly he may not be guilty, urged on by the sight of this pale suffering girl, whom he loves better than his life. And so his words sound cold to her, and because he has not denied the possibility of his marrying, and begetting heirs for the earldom, she thinks he acquiesces in what she says about it.

"What was Mountcarron thinking of to tell you Sir Francis' opinion?" he goes on presently. "You must know, Gladys, that these doctors always make the very worst of a case in order that they may gain the greater *kudos* for curing it. It is part of their trade."

"Did you imagine that Mountcarron was

likely to spare my feelings, whether the report were true or false, Jemmie? Has he ever done so? I think he took a spiteful pleasure in blurting out the news to me. He had the politeness at the same time to call me a d——d fool, and to say it was all my own fault."

"Gladys, you must not worry yourself about what he said. It is not true. Thank God your illness has been taken in time, and in a few months we shall have you running about again. I heard Sir Francis say so."

"Did you see him?" demands Gladys curiously.

Jemmie colours.

"I *have* seen him."

"When he came down here?"

"No; I saw him in London."

"And did you go up on purpose?"

"What if I did, Gladys?" Do you think I have not sufficient interest in you for that?"

"It was very good of you, Jemmie," she answers simply; but she still thinks his manner very cold to what it used to be. Mr. Brooke feels the difference that has crept into their intercourse, as well as she does. He wants sorely to make her understand that he is still her friend and lover, though he dares not show it as of old; but he cannot devise a plan for doing so, until Gladys herself paves the way for him.

"Elinor tells me," she says, "that Miss Temple is coming home from India, next month, with her father."

"I believe so," he answers; "the Governor-general's time has expired, and Colonel Temple returns with the rest of the staff."

"And that you are going up to meet her," continues Gladys jealously.

"Did Nell say that? She must have dreamt it, for I never told her so."

"But you will spend the season in London."

"Yes ; part of it at all events. I missed the whole of last season, you may remember," he adds, with a sigh.

"Whilst I was breaking my back with those foolish dances," exclaims Gladys. "Ah! how I used to dance, till I could hardly stand on my feet ; and how often I wished I could drop down dead before it was over."

"You would have been better employed, doing as I did," replied Jemmie.

"What were you doing? Flirting with Miss Temple?"

"I had not seen Miss Temple at that time. No ; I was watching beside the sick bed of poor Charlie Renton, and learning how a brave man can die."

"I don't think it is such a hard thing to die," says Gladys. "The hardest thing is *to live*."

"You are right ; and your words remind me of a *sadder* thing I saw, whilst I was absent—how a woman had

to live; shall I tell you the story, Gladys?"

"Oh, yes! tell me anything that will make me forget I am lying here."

"And yet, how glad this woman—a lady like yourself, Gladys—would have been to change places with you, even with the prospect of never getting up again."

"Was she so very unhappy, then?"

"I think she was; more unhappy than I pray God you may ever be! I met her first upon the steamer going to Alexandria. She was young, and she had been pretty, but grief had washed all the life and colour out of her face. Her husband, who was with her, seemed to love her dearly, and I could not understand why she should look so scared and timid, and start if any one spoke to her; and seem as if all she wanted was to hide herself in her cabin."

"Had she committed a murder?" asks Gladys, laughing.

"I think she *had*, dear, and that you will say so when my story is finished. We went to the same hotel in Alexandria together—this lady and her husband and myself—and there her conduct became still more mysterious. Their room was next to mine, and I used to hear her walking up and down, and sobbing as if her heart would break, and sometimes to my annoyance (for I pitied this poor lady greatly) I could overhear her husband reproaching her for her tears, and telling her she wearied him."

"But a woman who is always crying would weary any man, Jemmie. It would weary you, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps so," he answers, sighing. "I do not profess to be better or more heroic than other men, still it made me angry. The next thing that occurred was that the English ladies in the hotel were rude to my friend's wife, and she refused to appear at the public table."

"But what had she done to make them rude to her? She didn't cry at the dinner-table, did she?"

"Ah, Gladys! there are some circumstances under which women *will* be rude to one another, and the offended person can do nothing but submit. Cannot you guess the end of my story?"

"Indeed I cannot, unless—as I said before—she had committed some crime."

"She *had* committed the greatest crime of which a woman can be guilty in this world. Had she been a murderess—as you suggested—doubtless many would have been found ready to declare she was innocent or penitent, and had she been hung, she would have gone to the gallows with priests holding her hands and reading prayers over her to the last. But for the offence she had committed no one will ever read prayers. The world says it is past praying for. They will send a red-hot murderer to Heaven with a text on his lips,

but for a woman who loves too much there is no mercy."

Gladys understands now, and reddens to the roots of her hair.

"Wasn't she married?" she whispers.

Jemmie shakes his head.

"Her husband—I always looked upon him as her husband—told me the whole story. He had run away with her. She was a married woman—the wife of an influential county magistrate and landowner—and she had been miserable ever since. All his love couldn't make her happy. She had been accustomed to the esteem and respect of society, and the loss of it had broken her heart. I don't believe myself that the poor woman will live long. She was wasted to a shadow when I saw her last."

He waits for Gladys to say something, but her lips are fast closed, and she will not speak. Presently he continues:

"Oh, Gladys! when I used to see her

frightened, hunted look, and listen to her tears—I am not a religious man, you know that—but I used to thank Almighty God from the bottom of my heart, she was not *you*. It would have killed me to see you in such a position. I should have blown out your brains and my own.”

Still she makes no remark upon what he says.

“Is it not a sad story, Gladys? Cannot you picture her tears, her misery, her despair? Speak, dear! You would have felt for her as I did, would you not?”

“Perhaps! She had not run away with *you*.”

Oh! Woman! who will take no warning and accept no example, who can see nothing in her lover except the divinity which raises him above all other men, how truly Byron judged her when he wrote, that love was her “existence.” Jemmie, who has been carefully working up his narrative so as to preach a grand and

striking moral, is completely taken aback by the sweeping assertion with which Gladys knocks his whole fabric down to the ground.

“*You* would have felt for her.”

“*Perhaps!* She had not run away with *you*.” Ergo. “*Had* she run away with you she would not have needed pity.”

The logic of love. How weak, and yet how strong! It completely shuts our hero up. He feels that he has nothing more to say.

“Was the *man* miserable, as well as the woman,” demands Gladys presently.

Jemmie does not at once perceive the drift of the enquiry.

“*Very* miserable,” he replies eagerly. “I think the sight of her tears must have driven him half wild, for he was scarcely ever at home. He used to wander about the town all day, and play at cards, or billiards, in the evening. I scarcely ever saw them together

after we landed, except at meals. I suppose the thought of what he had done tortured him, and her presence was a continual reproach."

"Just like a man," remarks Gladys, sentimentously. "Doubtless, he was already sick and tired of her. They usually are after a month."

"It is the curse that follows an unlawful attachment," says Jemmie softly.

"Nonsense. It is the nature of men. They get just as tired of their wives as they do of their mistresses. For my part, I wish to Heaven I had never seen one of them."

"Does that mean you wish me to go?" asks Mr. Brooke, rising.

"I don't care if you go or stay. There is nothing but unhappiness for me any way. You have made me wretched, with your horrible story, when I thought you were going to amuse me. What do I care if that woman suffered or not? We all

suffer. It is enough to be a woman to ensure that."

"I thought——" he commences.

"Then *don't* think," she interposes impatiently; "what good can thinking do? If I hadn't stopped to think——"

But here she pauses, and leaves the sentence unfinished.

"Gladys," says Mr. Brooke, after a short interval, "when I asked the other day to be your friend, you rejected my friendship. You will not do that again, will you, dear?"

"No," she answers.

"And you will forgive me the pain I have caused you. Oh! let me have (at least) that consolation, for sometimes I feel as if I could not live this life without it."

"There is nothing to forgive, Jemmie."

"You know there is. Only don't let me have the misery of thinking I have ruined the happiness of your life by my unworthy conduct. Gladys, there may be so much

still in store for you, even as Mountcarron's wife. I do not believe this cloud will last for ever. He will see his folly before long, and awaken to a sense of your value. Try and conciliate him a little more, dear, and I feel sure you will win him back to your side. You know how much he used to admire you, as he must do still. How can he help it? You see, Gladys," Mr. Brooke goes on, with a sickly smile, "that I am talking to you already like a friend—or a Dutch uncle; but you will do me the justice to believe I have nothing but your welfare at heart."

"Oh, yes," she says indifferently, with her face turned away.

"It is rather hard lines," he continues, with a quivering lip, "that I should have to be the one to speak to you like this, dear, but there seems to be no one else to do it, and we—we have been such good friends always. I am very anxious to break off this intimacy between Mount-

carron and Miss Rusherton, and my efforts will be twice as effectual if you will second them with a little kindness on your part."

"You want me to begin and make love to Mountcarron at this stage of the proceedings," remarks Gladys. "I am afraid it will be difficult. I have such a stubborn nature. I can't chop and change about like some people. Perhaps if you would show me how you did it with Miss Temple——"

"Oh, Gladys! don't be foolish," he interrupts her impetuously: "If you turn all I say into ridicule it is useless my speaking further. My presence only seems to irritate you. I had better go."

He rises and walks towards the door, but before he can reach it he is arrested by a plaintive cry of—"Jemmie."

"What is it?" he enquires, without retracing his footsteps.

"I want you! Come here!"

He returns to the sofa, where Gladys is lying with the tears in her eyes.

"I didn't mean to be cross. Don't leave me like this? Kiss me before you go, Jemmie? You haven't kissed me once since you came back to Carronby." She holds her mouth up to him like a penitent child as she speaks, and Mr. Brooke feels as if a dozen devils were dragging him towards her.

"Gladys! my dear girl, don't ask me. You don't know—you cannot tell—what it would be to me! My duty to you—and—and—to *others* forbids it. For God's sake! let me go before I lose control of myself."

He wrings her hand like a vice as he concludes, and, turning from her, rushes out of the door and down the staircase. "How she tries me," he thinks, as he wipes the drops from his brow. "When shall I ever be brave enough to stand in her presence, and not remember what she *might* have been to me?"

Whilst Lady Mountcarron is sobbing on

her pillow and saying: "Oh! he doesn't love me any longer. He has forgotten me. I can see it so plainly. He said his—his duty to *others* forbade his kissing me. Oh, Heavens! *what* others, unless it is that odious Miss Temple. I understand it all now! Elinor was right. He is going to marry her, and *I*—Oh! how I wish I could die, and forget him and everything for evermore."



CHAPTER VII.

“REVENGE.”

MR. BROOKE has had several interviews with Mountcarron since the day they quarrelled about Miss Rusherton, and the earl seems to have forgotten the circumstance. The fact is, he is too selfish and indolent to cherish resentment.

He does not care sufficiently for Miss Rusherton to fight about her, and he *does* care (or he thinks he does) sufficiently for his cousin to make the idea of losing his society distasteful to him. Jemmie amuses and interests him. His buoyant, happy spirits and witty speeches contrast strongly with Mountcarron's dull, heavy manner, and we generally are attracted by that which is most unlike ourselves.

Indeed, it has been the loss of Jemmie's companionship, as much as anything else, that has made the earl seek that of Agnes Rusherton. He has received no sympathy at home, nor has he given any. A nature like that of Gladys, when it does not attract, repels. She evinces what she thinks too plainly, and her husband knows that she despises him for his common tastes and pursuits, whilst he has always been half afraid of her.

Agnes Rusherton, with her single gift of horsemanship, suits him far better.

But he is sincerely glad to welcome his cousin home again, and feels that he cannot afford to quarrel with him, whatever he may say. Mr. Brooke also is glad to see the breach healed. He hopes to be able to influence Mountcarron to do what is right, or, at all events, to keep him more away from Miss Rusherton. And, in a great measure, he succeeds. The earl instinctively falls into his old habit of asking Jemmie to

accompany him wherever he goes—and whether it is a run over to Brighton, or up to town, or out with the harriers, the cousins are generally to be seen together. Miss Rusherton does not like the innovation. She has been accustomed to receive Lord Mountcarron almost every day for the last six months, and now his visits have fallen off to one or two a week, and his excuses are invariably mingled with the name of Mr. Brooke. "*Jem and I*" is so constantly on his tongue that at last Miss Rusherton grows jealous. She traces the same influence working on the earl that Mr. Brooke brought to bear upon herself, and determines, if possible, to circumvent it. One afternoon, when his lordship presents himself after five or six days' absence, he finds his usually warm welcome exchanged for the coldest of greetings.

"Holloa!" he exclaims, "what's up now? What's the matter with your ladyship?"

"I should not imagine that the question

can have much interest for you, Lord Mountcarron, considering that I might have been dead and buried since we last met."

"But you are not dead and buried you see, my dear girl, so you can hardly expect me to cry. But I was here on Tuesday."

"Indeed you were not. You have not been here since last Friday."

"Haven't I? By Jove! I know I meant to come. But I remember now. That beggar Jem took me off to Henley to see a cart mare, and we didn't get back till dark. Very sorry, 'pon my soul, Agnes, but I'm glad you missed me anyway."

"I never said I had missed you, my lord. But, if this sort of thing goes on, the day will come when *you* will miss *me*!"

"By George! if you're not going to cut up in good earnest. That's right; you never look so handsome as when you're in a rage, nor give sweeter kisses than when you make it up again. But it is not *I* whom you

should bully, Agnes—it's Jem. It's all his fault, you may take my word for it."

"I *know* it is all his fault," Miss Rusherton replies, with quickened breath. "You have not been the same man since he returned from India."

"Well! I always was fond of Jem, you know, Aggie——"

"More fool you, my lord, for being so."

"Come, come, that's not polite! Why shouldn't I be fond of my own cousin? He is my nearest relation, remember."

"Yes; and your worst friend."

"I don't know that," replies the earl thoughtfully.

He has meditated more than once on the conversation Jemmie and he had held together concerning this woman, and has been fain to confess that his cousin is right. She is coarse and ill-bred, and beneath himself both in birth and manners. She is scarcely worth risking his good name

for, or fit to wear the coronet of the Mountcarrons. It is this conviction that has kept him away from her side of late. And she, without knowing it, guesses the truth. She recognises the motive that actuates the earl's conduct, and feels that the time has come for her revenge.

"Would you call a man your friend who tried to set me against you?" she demands quickly.

"Jem hasn't done anything of that sort! He hasn't been near you since his return."

"That's all you know about it. You come here so seldom yourself now that a regiment might call in the interval without your being any the wiser. Mr. Brooke was sitting in the same chair you occupy now for a couple of hours last Monday week."

"The deuce he was!" exclaims the earl, ready, like all men, to be jealous even of the woman he is prepared to resign. "Why, what did *he* want with you? He

always professes not to like you before me!"

Miss Rusherton laughs.

"Perhaps he professes not to like Lady Mountcarron as well, my lord."

"I don't know what that has to do with it."

"But *I* do. Anyway, Mr. Brooke honoured me with a call last week, and spent the afternoon here."

"Well, I repeat, what did he want? What did he say?"

"He said a great deal, and he insinuated a great deal more. There *was* a time, you know, my lord (as my pa and ma could tell you), when your cousin's attentions to me were very particular; but, of course, I shouldn't encourage them now. And perhaps it vexed him. Any way, he got very angry, and had the assurance to accuse me openly of—of——"

"Of what? Speak out, do? What's

the good of pretending to be modest before me ? ”

“ Well, of—caring for your lordship more than I ought to do, and then (you must make allowance for his being a little jealous, remember) he declared that if——really, my lord, you must excuse me. I cannot tell you the rest of it.”

“ If Jem could say it to you I should think you might repeat it to me. I insist upon hearing it,” says the earl authoritatively.

“ Well,” resumes Miss Rusherton, looking very modest, “ he said that if you were determined to make a fool of yourself (those were *his* words, mind) your family were as determined you should pay the price of your folly, and that, come what may, Lady Mountcarron would never give you a divorce.”

“ D——n it ! ” cries the earl, “ who *wants* a divorce ? ”

“ Oh ! my lord, he was cruel enough to

mean in case—in case—you ever *did* want one. Of course, I was indignant! What girl would not be, and just because you and I happen to be good friends? But I saw through Mr. Brooke's design, and I told him so."

"He wants you himself, I suppose. By George! he shan't have you, though."

"Oh, no, my lord, *that's* not his object—not *now*, at all events, for he knows it would be useless even to try. It was on her ladyship's behalf he came here, not mine. Any one could see that. And naturally, if she wanted an ambassador, she would employ Mr. Brooke. They are such very great friends."

"Of course they're friends — they're cousins "

"Yes. A cousin's love is a very convenient sort of love, isn't it, my lord. I had a cousin once who wanted to marry me. But he wasn't so good-looking as Mr. Brooke."

Mountcarron's face darkens.

"What do you mean to insinuate, Agnes?"

"*Insinuate!* Nothing. If your lordship doesn't mind it, I am sure no one else need."

"Mind *what?*"

"The intimacy between Mr. Brooke and her ladyship. Why, is it possible you never noticed it, last winter, when he was always at her side, indoors and out? Everyone in Carronby did. And I *have* heard it said that her ladyship's illness is all attributable to her cousin's absence, and that she fretted after him till she fell sick. But you ought to know more about that than anyone else."

"By Heavens!" exclaims the earl, leaping to his feet, "this is a nice thing you tell me, Agnes, that my wife has been making love to my cousin."

"Oh, my lord; I never said so. I only repeat what *others* say. Perhaps it is all

scandal. But certainly Mr. Brooke *did* leave England very suddenly and unexpectedly, and her ladyship has been out of sorts ever since. And people *will* talk, you know, whether you like it or not."

"Upon my word, it looks very suspicious," says the earl, pacing the room. "They *were* always together, and she's been as dull as ditch water since he went away. But if I find it to be true——"

"What would you do, my lord?"

"Divorce her like a shot. Do you think I would stand such a dishonour? And Jemmie too! Jemmie, whom I have trusted as I would my brother! By Jove, it's too much to believe."

"Don't believe it, then," says Miss Rusherton, soothingly. "I daresay it isn't true. *You* should be the best judge. If Lady Mountcarron has been affectionate, and confiding to you, as wives ought to be it's most likely a mistake. She couldn't be so deceitful as that. If she cared for any

one else you would be sure to guess it from her manner."

"You are only saying this to aggravate me farther, Agnes. You know that my wife is not confidential nor affectionate with me. I have told you times out of mind that she is as hard and cold as a stone. She repulses my advances, and never speaks to me unless she is obliged. I never suspected what you tell me before, but the more I think of it, the more I believe it to be true."

"You mustn't act upon it without further evidence," says Miss Rusherton, who is secretly delighted at the success of her communication.

"I shall act as I think best," he answers her. "I will have the truth from Lady Mountcarron's lips before I sleep to-night."

"But you won't give up my name as your authority, I hope. Her ladyship is not so big as I am," says Miss Rusherton laughing, "but I think she is more spiteful,

and can use her nails better. I shall never forget the way in which she received me and ma the day we dined at Carronby, nor the scorn with which she has treated us ever since."

"By Jove! if what you have said is true, she shall pay for her scorn, and that most dearly. And Jemmie too! This is what comes of marrying one of your fashionable beauties who has been reared in a hot-bed of vice."

"I never thought Lady Mountcarron had much 'eart,'" replies the fair Agnes, who has the weakness occasionally to slur her aspirates in a way to set her lover's teeth on edge. It seems to irritate him now, for he seizes his hat, and prepares to go.

"Oh, you'll stop for a cup of tea!" exclaims Miss Rusherton, aghast at losing him so soon.

"No, thank you! I am hurried to-day; I must go home," he replies, as he kisses her,

and vanishes. But the kiss is a hasty and formal one, and leaves the recipient in a very unsatisfactory frame of mind. She cannot foretell what will be the end of her disclosure, or if it will further her own shadowy prospects, or militate against them.

Meanwhile the earl walks home in a gloomy and suspicious state of mind, gnawing his moustaches, and wondering if this thing can possibly be true. In his heart he scarcely believes it. He does not love his wife! He has never felt more than an animal passion for her; but, coarse as his nature is, he cannot help admiring this fair, lily-like, high-bred girl, whom he has never detected in a vulgar action, nor heard give vent to a vulgar word. He does not remember in all his married life having sought her confidence nor given her his—nor spoken with her on any subjects higher than those that concern their material lives. And yet he has been cognisant all the time that Gladys is capable of dis-

cussing such things, and that Mr. Brooke has discussed them with her. Jemmie has been the one to sing, and read, and talk, and ride with her, and *he* has been only—*her husband!* How many men are *only* husbands to their wives, and leave other men to be their friends, and confidantes, and counsellors! Prudes—and generally prudes who have had no husbands—or having husbands, no friends—will cry out: "A woman should have no confidant but her husband"—yet what if the husband should prove unfit, or unworthy of confidence? What if he should be a fool, and unable to advise; or a gossip, and repeat one's secrets; or a scoffer, and turn a woman's inmost thoughts and aspirations to scorn? Is she to live her life within the circle of his narrow mind, and starve her soul because he cannot give it food? Perhaps she ought to do it, but if she is a woman in the true sense of the word, and not a talking doll, she never will! You

may fetter a body, but you cannot fetter a soul! So few men are the friends of their wives. A spark of admiration—a flame of passion—and then the book of love shrivels up, and leaves nothing but ashes behind it. That is the history of most marriages. It is the history of Lord and Lady Mountcarron's.

As the earl seeks his wife's presence he is dimly aware of it, although it does not make him less angry. Of course, according to his reasoning, it is the woman's fault. It always *is* the woman's fault. Why hasn't she confided in him he thinks. There he was, ready to be confided in. Why should we not drop a letter, containing our inmost thoughts, into a gutter instead of a post-office? Because the gutter would only carry it away, mingled with its own filth, and let it be forgotten, whilst the post-office receives it carefully and sends it straight to that other heart waiting to read and sympathise with and understand it. And that

is why wives will turn from a muddy stream to a clear rivulet until the Day of Judgment dawns. Nor do I believe they will require other defence for their shortcomings than the stains which the mud of the stream has left upon them.

When the earl reaches Carronby House he walks straight up to his wife's boudoir, and being admitted, sits down in gloomy silence.

Gladys regards his entrance with mild astonishment. She is lying, as usual, on the sofa, in a loose wrapper. Her little table with books and work is by her side. Her room is redolent with the scent of violets, cyclamen, hepaticas, and primroses, and she looks herself like a broken snow-drop as she rests upon her pillows. Parsons discreetly retires as soon as the earl enters, and the husband and wife are alone.

For a few moments there is silence between them, and then Gladys begins to suspect there is something wrong.

But she is not afraid. Her fearless nature is afraid of nobody, least of all of Mountcarron, who has taught her so thoroughly to despise him. So she is the first to open the conversation which she does by asking if anything is the matter.

"*Matter!*" repeats the earl, who is relieved to have the ice broken for him. "*Matter!* I should think there was."

"Miss Rusherton not on view?" says Gladys in a voice of the supremest contempt.

"My business here to-day," replies Mountcarron, "has nothing to do with Miss Rusherton or anybody but yourself. I desire to know, in the first place, what—what's the meaning of this illness of yours?"

"Had you not better put that question to the doctor? He knows more about it than I do."

"No, madam! I wish *you* to answer it.

Who or *what* have you been pining after to get yourself into this abominable state of health?"

"Some sign of sense in you," she says coolly.

"I will not be trifled with in this manner. I am in earnest, Lady Mountcarron, and I would have you know it. If you will not answer one question, perhaps you will another. For *what* reason did my cousin, James Brooke, leave Carronby, and go to India?"

At this she flushes (ever so little) not rosier than the blossom of pink cyclamen at her bosom, but still sufficiently to be apparent.

"I don't know why you should address such a question to me. Mr. Brooke is your relation, not mine. Go and ask him yourself."

"No! madam! I choose to ask *you*."

"And I choose to refuse to answer. I have gained but little by my marriage with

you ; but at least I retain the option of keeping my mouth shut."

The earl nearly gasps with amazement at her audacity.

"You have gained but little by your marriage with me? Do I hear you aright? I have given you a title—wealth—a magnificent home—a place in the peerage! and you call that *little*. What more, in heaven's name, did you expect or want?"

"You have never given me love, Mountcarron; and the things you mention are worth nothing to a woman without it. I found that truth out long ago."

"Oh! you did indeed. Perhaps, at the same time, you found some one who you could love without them."

Gladys is silent.

"Speak, madam? Can you deny that you feel more than friendship for my cousin, James Brooke?"

"I deny nothing."

"Are you aware that your prefer-

ence for him is known all over Carronby ? That your secret assignations and flirtations have been the gossip of the village ? That it is common rumour that you prefer him to me, and that, whilst I have been honouring you with the name and position of *my wife*, you have been making love to my cousin. Do you hear me, Gladys ? "

"Perfectly ! I am not deaf."

"And what have you to say to it ?"

"Nothing !"

"You do not deny the charge."

"I have told you already that I refuse either to admit or deny anything. I do not consider you have the right to call on me to do so. Whilst your relations with that woman Rusherton continue what they are your best safeguard is silence."

"But I refuse to be silent. My intimacy with Miss Rusherton has no concern in the matter. What *I* do is a very different thing from what *you* do. You are *my*

wife, and the wife of Cæsar must not be suspected."

Gladys laughs.

"Whilst Cæsar himself may do as he chooses. Exactly! But you see, the difficulty is, that you are *not* Cæsar! If a man wishes his wife to keep blameless he should set her the example of being so."

"Any way, madam, you will find that, blameless or not, I will stand no trifling from you. Unless you promise to give up this undue intimacy with my cousin I shall be compelled to take the matter into my own hands."

"I will never give my friends up. They may give *me* up, but I will never desert them."

"You acknowledge then that you prefer his so-called friendship to my respect or the position you hold."

"A thousand times over. If you will have the truth, there it is for you."

Lord Mountcarron rises in his anger, and advances towards her sofa threaten-

ingly. In her excitement, Gladys rises also, and confronts him.

"What is the use of assuming this show of righteous indignation?" she demands defiantly. "What have I ever done or said to you to make you think my heart was yours? What have you ever done or said to me to make me think you cared for anything better than the beauty you bought and paid for? Yes, Mount-carron, it is as well we should understand each other at last. You know that our marriage was a mere matter of barter and sale, but a matter in which I was the less guilty, because the more ignorant party. I had been brought up to believe a wealthy marriage to be the only end a girl had to live for, and to my misfortune I believed it. But you knew better, or you ought to have done. You were so many years older than myself. You had had so much more experience. You had seen so many women. Yet you bought

me—your wife—as you might have bought a Circassian slave—for my looks only. You never took the trouble even to enquire what was in my heart; you have never put a question to me on the subject since. You liked me well enough for a few months whilst I was new to you, and then you left me to myself and my *title* whilst you found fresher (if commoner) food to batten on! What right, then, have *you* to come here at the eleventh hour, and ask me *who* I *do* or who I do *not* love?”

“I have the right of a husband, and I insist upon its being complied with. Is James Brooke your lover or is he not?”

“I refuse to satisfy you.”

Her boldness enrages him. To see this frail girl, who looks as if a puff of summer wind would blow her away, and who is obliged to support herself by leaning against the head of the sofa, defying him with the courage of an Amazon, makes

him feel as if he had no power. It rouses his animal instincts. His natural ferocity and brutality rise uppermost, and without considering her condition, or his own superior strength, he strikes her across the breast. Gladys gives a cry, and falls backward, striking her spine against the carved leg of a table in her descent. At that very moment, and in time to see the blow, the door is flung open, and Mr. Brooke stands upon the threshold. He has knocked three or four times, but, hearing the contention of voices within, enters without invitation.

Gladys lies on the floor in a dead faint. As he sees it, Jemmie turns on the earl in a fury, that makes his face pale as that of the Avenging Angel.

"You cowardly brute! You d——d villain! How dare you strike her in her delicate state of health? By G——d! if I don't make your conduct known to all the world."

And the next moment, before his cousin has had time to answer him, he has rushed across the room, and raised Gladys in his arms.

"Gladys, Gladys!—Good Heavens! she has fainted again! Where is Parsons? Gladys, open your eyes! I believe you've killed her with your brutality."

"Drop my wife!" roars the earl. "How dare you hold her in that way, sir? By George! if you don't drop her, I'll kick you out of my house!"

"I will *not* drop her," replies the other boldly. "I will hold her, against you and the world, until I have placed her in better care than yours, and then you may kick me out of your house, *if you can.*"

"You defy me to my face, do you?—both of you?" says Mountcarron. "She has just refused to deny that you are her lover, and now *you* come, and clasp her to your breast before my very eyes. By

heavens! if I'm not revenged on both of you."

"*Did* she refuse to deny it?" says Jemmie, looking down with ineffable tenderness on the white, still face that reposes on his arm. "If so, it is because she cannot utter a falsehood. I *am* her lover, Mountcarron; but not in the sense you mean. I love her as a brother, and I shall love her so to the end. If your anger must visit some one let it fall on me, for I am the only one to blame in this matter."

"I don't believe you," exclaims the earl. "I've heard of these brotherly and sisterly attachments before, and I know what they end in. Will you *swear* you have never thought of her in any other light than a sister?"

"Will *you* swear, that if I tell you the truth, you will never visit my offence upon her head."

"Not if she is blameless."

“She is blameless, Mountcarron; blameless as the angels of God in heaven. I know that what I am about to tell you will separate me from her—perhaps for ever,” says Jemmie, with a strangled sob; “but, for *her* sake, I will bear it. Well! I loved her, Mountcarron—I loved her even before you married her. Nay, man! you may as well hear me to the end, and I was mad enough to tell her so.”

“When!”

“Last Christmas. I would have taken her from you and everybody! Aye! from God Himself! if she would have come. But she refused me. She preferred to remain with you at Carronby. Can you take a worse revenge on me than that?”

“She refused to listen to you?”

“Have I not told you so? I left my home in consequence because I was wretched, and I knew it was better I should go. When I felt I was cured I came back again. That is the whole his-

tory, and, as I said before, I am the only culprit. Whatever you believe, you must believe that."

"Cured or not cured," replied the earl, in a sullen tone, "you cannot enter Carronby House again; this ends everything between us. We are strangers from this moment."

"I knew you would say so, and I am prepared for the consequences of my avowal. If you will call Parsons to her assistance, I will go at once. But be kind to her, Mountcarron. She has a loving heart and a sensitive nature. Only be kind and gentle with her, and she will reward you for the trouble."

"Thanks! I don't want any of your advice about my wife. You can keep it for your own. Here! Where's that fool Parsons?" And he walks into the next room to find the maid.

Jemmie bends down hurriedly, and presses a last kiss on Gladys' pale face.

“For *your* sake, my own darling,” he whispers, “for your dear sake. Pray God, my pain may bring forth peace for you.” In another minute the servant takes possession of her mistress, and the two men walk down the stairs, and into the vast hall together.

“*There* lies your road,” says the earl, pointing in the direction of Nutley; “and don’t cross it again whilst I live.”

Mr. Brooke is too proud to answer him, or to attempt to make better terms. He merely bows his head in acquiescence, and, passing over the threshold, walks quickly away.



CHAPTER VIII.

“RELEASE.”

JEMMIE goes home to Nutley, and eats his dinner as if nothing had occurred. The arrow has overshot the mark this time. He is suffering too much to be able to endure even the idea of sympathy. But, as they sit together in the evening, he tells his sister quietly that Lady Mountcarron is worse, and persuades her to write a letter to Mrs. Fuller, mentioning the circumstance, and advising her not to delay her visit to Carronby longer than necessary. When the epistle is signed and sealed, Lady Renton is surprised to see her brother take it in his hand, and hear him say he will post it himself.

"My dear boy," she exclaims, "it cannot go until the afternoon post to-morrow."

"It will if it is posted at Allonby."

"Is it of so much consequence as all that?"

"I think so."

"Then let William carry it. It is a bitter night, and not fit for you to be out."

"Thanks; but I don't feel the cold, and I should like a walk. I ride too much, Elinor. I am getting fat and lazy."

"*Fat and lazy!*" she echoes, with a laugh, as she looks after his slight and graceful form.

Jemmie buttons his great-coat over the letter, and walks out into the keen and frosty air. There has been a slight fall of snow the day before, and the country looks like a great twelfth-cake. The night is bright as day. The moon shines, cold and clear, and the firmament of heaven is studded with stars. As he strides along to Allonby, which is about three miles

distant, he cannot help wondering why the earth should be so beautiful and life so sad. His life is over. He has ended it to-day. The wild words he uttered have sealed his fate and her's. They will never meet again. And *why*, he asks himself, did it ever happen? Who planned it, and permitted it, and made it so easy, only that it might be the means of breaking both their hearts? Why did he ever meet Gladys, or, having met her, loved her, and, having loved, been called upon to resign her? It all seems so hard, so incomprehensible to him! Life is so short, and there is so little happiness for any of us in it. Why did he let his go? Was it a good or a bad angel that prompted him to refuse her sweet offer of herself? In his present state of mind Jemmie cannot decide. He tells himself he has tried to do the right thing and failed. During this moonlight walk, when the stars are the only listeners to the confession of his weakness, Mr.

Brooke does not mind avowing that he tried hard, very hard indeed, to love Miss Temple.

Gladys was not there to cast her sweet spells over him, and he believed it to be his duty to *unlove* her if he could, and he knew of no better way than that of putting another woman in her place. Georgie Temple was very beautiful and very fascinating, and she showed the young Englishman every attention. He might have had her for the asking, if he could have screwed up his courage to ask; but somehow, whenever the words were nearest to his lips, another pair of eyes rose up between him and Miss Temple, and caused them to die away upon his tongue.

The time is not ripe yet for him to accept a cure for his sore disease.

"It is my fate," he thinks, as he marches rapidly along. "It will be '*Gladys—Gladys*,' to my life's end. If I am condemned to live to old age I suppose I shall

marry. One cannot sit down and cry over a grief like this for ever, but no wife will have the power to drive this first, best love from my heart. When she looks her sweetest at me I shall think how much less sweet she is than Gladys. When my children climb my knee I shall sigh to miss those violet eyes and that dear sensitive mouth I love so well. In fact, my life—whether it be short or long—will be one unbroken yearning to get back to her whom I have given up to-day for ever! How can I bear to live at Nutley with the chance of meeting her out driving or riding each day of my life? The anticipation will make a coward of me. I shall have to go away again. And yet to leave Nell, who is so bound up in me! It seems awfully cruel. My life is cruel, whichever way I look at it. I have lived but five and twenty years, and I would thank God if He ended it to-night!"

He walks straight to Allonby, and

straight home again, and the rapid exercise enables him to sleep. But with the morning comes back the old pain. It seems to Jemmie as if, in telling Mountcarron of his love for Gladys, he had pronounced his own death warrant. Of course he does not go near Carronby House. If he leaves Nutley it is to ride in exactly the opposite direction. He occupies himself more over his own farm and estate than he has ever done before, and Lady Renton notices the change, but does not speak of it. She surmises that something unpleasant has occurred between her brother and her cousin, and she tries to make it up to Jemmie by visiting Gladys oftener herself, and bringing home all the news she can glean of her. Through Elinor, he learns that General and Mrs. Fuller have arrived, and taken charge of their suffering daughter, and that a second summons has been sent to Sir Francis Cardwell to come down and see his patient.

"Gladys is certainly worse," says Lady Renton," and seems in constant pain. I think she must have strained her back again in some way, but she denies having had an accident, except in falling when she fainted. General and Mrs. Fuller are in a dreadful state of anxiety concerning her, and want to take her to the German baths this summer if Sir Francis advises it. I think they would do her good myself."

"And what does Mountcarron say to it? Is he kind to his wife? Does he appear friendly with the Fullers? Have they heard anything about the Rusherton story?"

"I hope not, I'm sure, but they would not be likely to mention it before me if they had. I have only met Mountcarron once in their company, and then he seemed more sulky than anything else. I don't think they get on very well together, but Mrs. Fuller is more cordial with him than the General."

“ Ah ! she always thought so much more of the marriage than the man. Isn't it strange how mothers will sacrifice their children for a coronet and a fortune ? Abraham offering up Isaac was a joke to it.”

“ The children are such willing sacrifices,” remarks Lady Renton drily.

“ Yes, you are right, Nell. I am glad our little Hughie is a boy. If ever I should have daughters——” but here he stops and sighs. His sister wisely does not notice that sigh. She wants to keep the flood-gates of memory shut, not open !

“ What are you going to do to-day, Jemmie ?” she asks.

“ Hunt ! There is a meet at eleven at Dingle Dell.”

“ Mountcarron will be there. I heard him say so last night.”

“ D—n it all. What do I care ? Do you suppose I'm going to be kept out of my usual enjoyments from fear of meeting that ass ? ”

"Certainly not, dear, only you needn't swear. I only told you the fact."

"I'm awfully hasty, aint I?" he rejoins, with ready penitence, "and I'm beastly cross and irritable with you, Nell, which is the d—dest shame of all. But it's not all my fault, dear. I'm not always master of myself just, now. I'll be better by-and-bye. You'll forgive me, won't you, Nell?"

For all answer she draws his handsome face down to her own, and kisses it fondly.

"My darling Jem!" she says, with wet eyes. "If I could only secure your happiness by giving up my own, God knows how thankfully I would resign it."

"And I wouldn't let you if you could," he answers. "You have had more than your share of trouble already, and you've borne it like a brick. I mean to try to follow your example. Ours was always a plucky family you know. Don't credit me with less courage than yourself, Nell."

As Jemmie rides his favourite "Flyer" to

the place of meeting, he sees Mountcarron and Miss Rusherton, as usual, side by side. Agnes is mounted on the beautiful chestnut mare, "Goldfly," which the infatuated earl exchanged with her, but Mountcarron himself bestrides a new animal, a powerful-looking hunter of gigantic build, another of Miss Rusherton's recommendations, Jemmie supposes. As he encounters the pair he touches his cap to them, but the civility meets with no response from either side, and he turns humiliated away. He could not have treated his cousin so in public (he thinks), not if they had had fifty quarrels as bitter as this one.

When he has moved to some little distance he turns and watches them. He does not like the look of Mountcarron's horse. He can see by the way it lays back its ears, and shews the whites of its eyes every time it is approached by another animal, that the brute is vicious—and, also, that it is too tightly curbed. Jemmie knows much more

about horses than the earl. He is a much better rider than his cousin, who has always been a clumsy horseman, with a heavy hand and an uncertain seat. He is, moreover, too great a weight to be thrown with impunity. The antics of the powerful creature he is riding make Mr. Brooke uneasy. He sees that Mountcarron is going just the wrong way to manage him, and he cannot forget, all in a minute, that he cares for his cousin, just because he has been ordered out of his house. So, after a while, he moves up to Mountcarron's side again, as if by accident, and, dismounting, professes to be occupied with "Flyer's" girths. Then, turning to the earl, he tries to say carelessly, though his voice shakes :

"By the way, Mountcarron, your horse's curb is far too tight. Shall I loosen it for you?"

The only evidence the earl gives of having heard him speak is to twitch his horse's bridle with such violence as to turn

the brute completely round, with its hind quarters in close proximity to "Flyer's" flanks. A giggle from Miss Rusherton, added to this insult, makes it doubly hard for Mr. Brooke to bear. He mounts his steed as quickly as possible, and rides off in company with some other men. The hunt is soon started, and leads them for the most of the way over the Sussex Downs. Jemmie perceives, by the manner in which his cousin commences the day's sport, that his animal will give him trouble, and finds himself half the time straining his eyes anxiously in his direction.

Towards noon they come to a low stone wall. Miss Rusherton's "Goldfly" takes it like a bird, but Mountcarron's horse refuses the leap. The earl, always irritable with animals, and doubly so to-day, because of Jemmie's proximity, spurs him like fury. The brute commences to rear, and being hit over the head with the hunting crop, wheels round and bolts, with the bit in his teeth,

across country. Mr. Brooke looks after him in dismay. He is making straight for a chalk pit.

"Turn his head, Mountcarron, for God's sake!" he cries excitedly, as the earl flies past him like an arrow from a bow, sawing with both hands at the mouth of the animal, who, with his head well down between his knees, is carrying his rider where he will. "He will ride into the chalk pit as sure as there's a heaven," exclaims Jemmie, as he prepares to follow him. But what can they do to help him? Mountcarron's horse already appears to be vanishing in the distance. To follow him closely is but to increase the danger, and yet before him yawns the awful chalk pit, which is certain death.

"Check him suddenly with one hand."
"Throw yourself off, man; for pity's sake, throw yourself off!" Such are the cries and entreaties that follow the earl on his headlong career, and that are of as much use as

a twig laid across his path. When they see that their exhortations are of no avail, and that Mountcarron has lost all command of his steed, Mr. Brooke and a few of the sportsmen prepare to follow him. Miss Rusherton stays where the accident began. She is too much afraid of what she may see to ride towards the chalk pit.

“My God!” cries one of the men, “he is over!”

Jemmie shuts his eyes. A terrible giddiness seizes his brain. He dares not even *think* what is before him. In another minute the riders have drawn rein and are dismounting. He dismounts with them. They have arrived at the very verge of the pit, but he cannot look over. One of the strangers is more courageous. “By God!” he exclaims, “smashed to atoms, both of them.” At these awful words Mr. Brooke seems imbued with sudden life. He is frantic to go to the rescue of his cousin. Against all advice and warning, he lets

himself down the precipitous side of the chalk pit, tearing his clothes, his hands—bruising his whole body in the descent. He would not care if he killed himself in order to carry help to Mountcarron. As soon as—half sliding, half falling—he has reached the bottom of the excavation, he is at his cousin's side, and has dragged him from where he lies half covered by the quivering body of his horse.

"Fetch a surgeon as soon as ever you can," Jemmie shouts to those above him. "He is still alive—he is only stunned. Get help for Heaven's sake!" And then he takes his cousin in his arms, and pillows his head upon his strong young breast.

"Mountcarron, dear old fellow; are you much hurt? Speak to me, if it is only one word. This is breaking my heart."

At this appeal the earl opens his eyes, but there is a film already gathering over them.

"Floored, by Jove!" he says faintly, and

then, perceiving Jemmie, he adds, as though there had never been a word of difference between them : "Jem, you beggar ! don't cry ; I always was fond of Jem," and closes his eyes again.

"Oh, Mountcarron !" cries the young man, overcome with grief and fear, "we have been like brothers, Mountcarron. Say you forgive me ! I never meant—I never thought—*If* you had loved her——" he continues, in broken sentences, but, unable to proceed, ends up with the one cry for mercy : "Speak, in God's name. Say you forgive me."

"It's all right," mutters the earl in a low, thick voice. "All right, Jem. I—I—forgive. Don't—bother—yourself—about me." And with that, he stretches himself suddenly in his cousin's arms, gives one strong shiver, and dies !

Jemmie sits there with the dead body of Mountcarron in his arms, like a man in a trance. Even when the surgeon arrives

with a stretcher, and a score of gossiping, wondering neighbours, to carry the injured man home, he lets them take the corpse from him without a word. There is no need for Dr. Chambers to break the news to him that the earl is dead. He knew it from the first, and the shock has stunned him. He sends a messenger on to Carronby House to break the news to General Fuller, and then he follows the mournful procession that bears the body of Mountcarron to his late home.

When once it is deposited there—laid reverently on the bed on which it had rested so full of life and vigour a few hours before—Mr. Brooke turns mournfully away and rides back to Nutley.

His brain is in a whirl, his heart is bowed down beneath the torture of remorse, and he feels there is but one person in the world he wants to go to—his sister !

There seated at her feet, with her arms about his neck, and his face hidden in her

lap—alone with her—his second mother, and his God—Jemmie pours out a full confession of all his weakness, and folly, and regret, and receives her womanly sympathy and tenderness as balm for his relief. He is able to think and speak of nothing but Mountcarron, and the injury he has done him. Everything else connected with his death, the sudden change it makes in his own prospects, the obstacles it removes from his path, do not appear to enter his mind.

When the old butler, who has descended as a legacy from his father to himself, enters the room and announces solemnly :

“Dinner is served, my lord.”

Jemmie starts as from a dream.

“*What?*” he exclaims.

“The dinner is served, my lord,” repeats the butler, and Lady Renton answers :

“Yes, yes, Simmonds, it is all right, we will be in directly,” before the bewilderment has passed out of her brother’s eyes.

"You forget, my darling," she says softly, "that the honour of our name now rests upon you."

"Yes," he replies, brokenly, "I had forgotten it. And then, laying his fair head down in his sister's lap, as if he were once more a little child, the new Earl of Mountcarron bursts into tears as he exclaims: "And I *deceived* him, Nell!—I deceived him."



CHAPTER IX.

“AT LAST.”

IT is unnecessary to describe the funeral. Funerals are depressing, soul-sickening spectacles at any time; and the Earl of Mountcarron's is made, in deference to his rank, a little more depressing than the generality. It is attended by half the county, and Jemmie is chief mourner, in heart as well as deed. When the ceremony is concluded and the legal formalities gone through, and the library somewhat cleared of mourning guests, the new earl draws General Fuller to one side.

“General,” he says nervously, “I hope Lady Mountcarron understands that Carronby House is at her disposal for as long as she wishes to remain here. I am going

away for awhile. The suddenness of this business has upset me, and I require change. I may not reside at Carronby House for a year. Will you tell her, she is not to hurry—she is to consider the place her own——"

"You are very good, my dear lord, but we go home to-morrow, and my daughter goes with us. All her cry throughout this sad affair has been that I should take her home. It is but natural, you know. This is a great upset to a young life, and the poor child longs for the comfort and support of her own family. So we have made all our arrangements to return to London to-morrow morning."

"*To-morrow morning!*" repeats the earl, "that is very soon! May I be allowed to wish her good-bye?"

But here Mrs. Fuller interposes. *She* has guessed her daughter's secret (if the general has not), and does not think that an interview with the quondam Mr. Brooke at this

juncture would conduce to the support of the widowed countess' dignity.

"I am sorry to refuse your request, Lord Mountcarron," she says stiffly, "but Gladys is (as you are aware) very weak in health, as well as broken in spirit, and I should be quite afraid of the effect of her seeing anyone at present connected with the past. She feels her bereavement terribly."

This is added in the mother's pride lest the man before her should imagine that her daughter is secretly triumphing in her release.

"Of course, she must do so!" replies Lord Mountcarron innocently. "It has been a blow to all of us! I have not slept one night since it occurred."

He is very much disappointed at not being allowed to see Gladys—and bid her farewell. He does so yearn by a look—a pressure of the hand—a whisper of hope to leave her some token of his affection to console her loneliness. But perhaps (as he

tells himself) it is better not. It is all too new—too horrible. She might be repelled, not comforted, by his presence. He might appear as a reproach to her, rather than as a friend. So he contents himself by saying :

"Will you give then, my—my—kind regards to Lady Mountcarron, and tell her what I said with regard to Carronby ; and that if I can be of the slightest use to her she is to command me."

General Fuller delivers this message to the girl lying on her sofa, with her big eyes fixed upon vacancy, waiting she knows not for what. The colour kindles on her pale cheek as she hears Jemmie's name—which her mother is not slow to observe—but she gives no other sign of feeling.

"And—and—shan't I see him before I go?" she asks, as her father concludes.

"The earl doesn't wish it, my dear," interposes Mrs. Fuller quickly. "He seemed quite relieved when I suggested that the interview had better be delayed. He is ner-

vous naturally, I think, of appearing before you under his altered circumstances. He said you could stay at Carronby House as long as ever you chose, for he is going away at once. But of course your father told him that you are to accompany us to town."

"*Going away!*" falters Gladys, "going away at once! But *where?*"

"My dear, that is no business of ours," replies her mother almost pettishly. "We shall have little enough to do with Lord Mountcarron or Carronby House for the future. All we have to think of now is your health and the provision the late earl made for you. It is a very handsome one, thank Heaven, and will render you independent of any friends for the rest of your life."

But Gladys turns her sad face away again, and does not seem to take any pleasure in the idea of the settlement made for her.

General Fuller regards his widowed daughter with mingled interest and curiosity. He cannot understand her. It fell to his lot to break the news of her husband's death to her, and, after the first wild stare of surprise and incredulity, all that she said was : "*It is too late—too late.*"

Too late for *what*? The "dear old dad" thought that sudden grief had turned his favourite child's brain, until his wife told him not to be a fool, and to leave off speculating on matters he knew nothing about. But he can see one thing—that however Gladys may regard the sudden quenching of her ambitious hopes she truly and earnestly longs to find herself at home with him again. She clings to him throughout this painful time far more than to her mother, and seems to have no peace unless he is within call. When they have transported her to Cardigan Place it is the same thing. At her own request a

room adjoining the library is fitted up as a bed-chamber for her accommodation, so that her sofa may be wheeled into the general's presence every morning, and she may be within sight of her father's face and within sound of his voice. And if this renewed intercourse is precious to Lady Mountcarron, how much more so is it to General Fuller? He seems to grow younger for having his favourite daughter near him again. He becomes the tenderest and most careful nurse that she possesses. He is the first to enter her room in the morning—the last to leave at night. He carries all her meals to her with his own hands, and will permit no one else to propel the sofa that bears so precious a freight.

And after a few weeks of such intercourse the general possesses more than his child's affection. He receives her full and perfect confidence—a confidence which distresses while it delights him.

“What are you thinking of, my Gladys?”

he says one day, as he watches the tears gradually filling her violet eyes.

"Darling old dad ! I was thinking what a nice end this is to my fine marriage. I *would* be a countess you see, spite of all you said to me, and here I am—a chronic invalid—no use to anybody or anything, and with the prospect of taxing your patience for the remainder of my life. What's the use of money or title to me now? What would I *not* give to be Gladys Fuller again, running about all over the house and dancing till the small hours of the morning."

"But, my darling child, your illness is not due to your being a countess."

"Ah, father ! you don't know half my story. I tried to make the best of it whilst *he* lived for your sake, but now that it is all over why should you not know? You were right, dear old dad ! I thought I could be happy without love, but it was a terrible mistake. Love is necessary to

our very being. We cannot live in this world without it."

The general's kind eyes look troubled.

"It makes me unhappy to hear what you have suffered, my darling. But, thank God, you are still young, and you may yet win the love you have hungered for."

But Lady Mountcarron gives a sudden cry of pain :

"No, no, dad ! don't say that. It hurts me so. Listen, dear ! I have met the love that could have satisfied me, and passed it by. It has gone from me. It will never be mine again. Don't speak of it for heaven's sake."

The only answer her father makes to this appeal is to approach her couch and take her in his arms.

"*You* can feel for me, darling old dad ! can't you ?" she continues sobbing. "I guessed—oh, long ago !—that everything has not been right in that way with you. And it has made me love you so, father. It has made me *love* you so——"

The general, thinking of his lost Winifred, presses her closer to his heart, but still answers nothing.

"So you will never mention it again, will you dear? It must be as sacred to you as your loss is to me, and we will live for each other, dad! I shall never marry again. I hate the very name of marriage. And I will be your daughter and your companion and friend until we both go to heaven together." So, little by little, she unlocks her bosom of all its grief, and the general learns what a terror her marriage became to her, and what a relief its cessation is. But the name of the mysterious lover, whose remembrance makes all other men as shadows, he never hears and cannot guess. What his wife and Wianie knew by intuition he will never dream of until it is shouted into his ears.

Gladys believes thoroughly at this period that Jemmie has forsaken her. She mourns for him as we mourn for the dead,

and no more thinks he can come back into her life again, and make it one long joy, than we look forward to the return of the departed.

He has written her two or three letters, but they are carefully worded, and she cannot, or she will not, read between the lines. Her woman's mind is not broad enough to gauge the breadth of his—nor her nature deep enough to understand his nobility. She puts down all his enforced control to coldness, and weeps over his friendly letters as if they were the very grave of love.

When Winifred, one day, cautiously alludes to the confidence entrusted to her in the past, and expresses a hope that the path will soon be cleared for her sister's happiness, Gladys rebukes her as if she had committed a fault.

"Never speak to me of it again, Winnie," she exclaims hotly. "I am ashamed to think of what I told you. It is all past and

over long ago. Pray—*pray* forget it—and believe that (if it were possible) it would never be. He is quite different from what I thought him, and I am cured of my folly."

"I am very glad to hear it," replies Mrs. Prendergast practically, "because I never thought much of him myself, and I have no doubt that you can do better. You have had about enough of the Mountcarrons I expect, and would like to change the name, if only to get rid of the sound of it."

"*Do better!*" echoes Gladys scornfully. "What folly it is of you to talk like that when you know I shall be tied to this couch for the rest of my life. How can I marry again, Winnie? Who would be such a fool as to take a wife with a spinal complaint?"

"Oh! that will be all right by-and-bye," replies her sister cheerfully. She says it cheerfully for Gladys' sake; but all her family are beginning to be alarmed on her

account. Sir Francis has not lost hope ; but he thinks it will be a very tedious illness. The cruel blow which sent her with such violence against the table has been followed by symptoms which threaten to prostrate her altogether. So that those about her are very careful to buoy her up with hope—a process which defeats its end, and makes the invalid still more suspicious of her own condition. And, meanwhile, Lord Mountcarron is saying every day to his sister :

“Cannot I go up to-morrow, Nell ? Don’t you think I have waited long enough ?”

And Lady Renton will shake her head, and answer :

“It’s only three months, dear boy. It would be scarcely decent to speak to her yet.”

And he turns away impatiently to his occupation, only to repeat the same question the morning afterwards. At last he says :

"I cannot take your advice any longer, Nell. You do not think of her suffering and mine. It is now nearly five months since poor dear Mountcarron died. Of course, we can't be married."

"*Married*, Jemmie! What on earth are you thinking of?" exclaims his sister.

"*Do* hear me out, Nell. Of course (as I say) we can't be married (though it's beastly humbug) until the year is up; but that's no reason why I shouldn't speak to my dear girl, and make it all right between us. I can't bear the suspense any longer. It is simply killing me. I must have her promise and give her mine, or I shall go out of my mind."

"Perhaps she has changed hers by this time," remarks Lady Renton sententiously. She is, truth to tell, a little jealous of this mad passion of her brother's for Lady Mountcarron.

"Thank you for the suggestion," cries the earl, starting to his feet. "That means

I go to London by the eleven o'clock train. I won't wait another night now to learn my fate."

He reaches Cardigan Place just in time. It is the middle of July, and the family are packing up to start for Germany, where it is hoped that some particular baths may do Lady Mountcarron good.

Everyone is out except the general, who, knowing no reason to the contrary, ushers the young earl into Gladys' presence without the slightest preparation.

"*See her*, my dear fellow! Of course you can see her. Why not? Indeed, we have expected you would call before now; but, perhaps, you have not been up in town this year?"

"No! My sister and I thought it better not under the circumstances."

"True, true. Very sad. We have all felt it; but Lady Mountcarron is stronger. Oh! decidedly stronger. Sir Francis says there is a visible improvement, and he has

great faith in the German baths, for which we start next week."

"Next week!" exclaims Lord Mountcarron. "Then I am only just in time?"

"Only just in time," laughs the general; "but I am sure Gladys will be pleased to see you."

He has been walking with his guest towards the library as he speaks, and now throws open the door without further ceremony.

"Gladys, my child, I have brought an old friend to see you. Lord Mountcarron has called to say 'good-bye' to us before we start for Germany."

At that name, Gladys, who has looked up eagerly from her pillows at her father's entrance, sinks back upon them again white as ashes.

"It is only momentary," whispers the general to the earl. "The sound of the name upsets her. She will recover more quickly without witnesses. I will leave

you alone with her," and, retreating as he speaks, General Fuller closes the door behind him.

Lord Mountcarron advances to the sofa, and looks down upon the white-robed form that is shrinking from him, and hiding her face with her hands.

"My Gladys!" he says at last, in a voice of infinite tenderness.

At that sound she knows she has her friend again—not her lover, perhaps—but still her friend, and the colour rushes back into her cheeks till they glow like the heart of a crimson rose.

"Why didn't you come before?" she sighs.

"They wouldn't let me," he answers.

"Elinor has been persuading me it would be too soon, that you would misconstrue my motives, and think me intrusive. But I think we understand each other, Gladys. During the last few interviews we had together, there was no reserve between us, was there?"

"None," she answers, with another blush, though her heart sinks to think what he may have come to tell her.

"Has *your* mind changed since then, Gladys?"

"No," she falters.

"Neither has mine. You were fond of advising me to marry. I think you did so the last time we met. Well, I am going to take your advice. Does that surprise you?"

"No," in a very faint voice.

"If it was necessary before, it is doubly so now. Will you wish me joy, dear?"

"Yes. Is is—is it—Miss Temple?"

"*Is it Miss Temple?*" repeats Lord Mountcarrow with a laugh. "Is it the man in the moon? Is it anyone—*could* it be anyone but the woman I love as my life? You know who that is, Gladys?"

She shakes her head. She does not yet believe in Jemmie's fidelity to her.

As he observes the sad, incredulous ex-

pression of her face, he draws nearer, and kneels down by her side.

“There was a girl once, Gladys, who offered to give up the world, and everything she cared for most, for my sake, who was willing to exchange wealth, and rank, and position, for disgrace and ignominy, only so that she might be by my side.”

“Ah, Jemmie!” she cries impulsively, hiding her face in her hands, “don’t remind me of that.”

He takes possession of those hands, and draws them away, and lays his face down in their place.

“But I *must* remind you of it, darling. The sweetest, proudest hour of my life! I had to hurt you then, my Gladys (though God knows how I bruised my own heart in doing so), but it was for *your* dear sake more than my own. Let me heal the wound now if it is in my power to heal it. Let me try and repay you in some poor measure for your unselfish love by giving

you my name and my protection and everything that I possess. You are my wife already, darling. The marriage of our souls was registered in heaven long ago. Let it be followed by its natural consummation in the eyes of the world."

"*Your wife?* Jemmie," she says, her whole frame trembling at the idea; "*your wife?* But oh! you forget what I have come to! How *can* I be your wife—tied to this sofa for a lifetime? How could I do the honors of your house, or fulfil any of the duties of my station, a miserable log, unable to lift a hand to help myself? Oh! Jemmie, Jemmie, you forget." she continues in a burst of tears. But he kisses them away.

"I have forgotten nothing my darling girl. Above all, I have not forgotten that when I learned to love you in a better way than the mere love of earth, I learned to value your heart and soul above your body. Whilst they remain, my Gladys,

true to me, you are my wife, and no other woman shall ever fill your place."

"How can I let you tie yourself for life to an useless invalid?"

"How can you prevent me?" he answers gaily, "if I have set my heart upon it? Come, Gladys! there was a time when you never could refuse your Jemmie anything. Will you begin now?" He takes her in his arms, and lays her head down on his breast, and showers his passionate kisses on her eyes and lips, until he hears her murmur:

"Oh, Jemmie! I am yours—I always *was* yours—from the first moment that we met. Do with me as you will."

* * * * *

The last time I saw them was at Carronby House. They had been married then three years, and Viscount Talmage, who was nearly a twelvemonth old, was leaping in his nurse's arms, and screeching like a

young owl at the antics of his cousins, the little Prendergasts, who were rolling over each other on the grass.

Mrs. Fuller and Winnie were fussing over the children, and General Fuller was sitting with Lady Mountcarron on the lawn, under the shade of some fine old trees. Gladys looked delicate still, she will probably always look delicate—but she could stand and walk as well as ever, though she told me she could not take violent exercise.

"Luckily for you, my dear," laughs the general "You never *need* take it, and I don't believe Mountcarron would let you take it if you could."

"I don't believe he would," replies Gladys smiling. "I think Jemmie would have a fit if he saw me try to run. He won't even let me carry my baby about."

"I wish you'd cure yourself of that trick of calling your husband by his Christian name, Gladys," says Mrs. Fuller reprov-
ingly. "It is not the custom, as you know,

and it sounds very ridiculous. Indeed, I don't think it's respectful."

Mrs. Fuller cannot cure herself of the trick of thinking more of the marriage than the man, and shudders at anything which she considers lowers the dignity of the Earl and Countess of Mountcarron.

"Here he is," exclaims Gladys, thankful for an interruption to her mother's homily, as Lord Mountcarron comes across the lawn, looking handsomer than ever, in a shooting suit of brown velveteen, and accompanied by the eldest "cub," now grown into quite a respectable-looking young man.

"My darling, how late you are!" cries Gladys, as she goes to meet him, and Mountcarron throws his arm about her dainty waist, and looks down lovingly into her beaming eyes.

"Jemmie," she whispers on tip-toe, with her face close to his, "what name do you like me to call you best?"

"The name you used to call me in Moonlight Dell, sweetheart," he answers, in the same tone. "The name you called after me when we parted (as we thought for ever)—the name with which you welcomed me back to your loving heart again! Let me be nothing but '*Jemmie*' to you, Gladys—your own Jemmie—to my life's end."

And then, to the utter horror of Mrs. Fuller, and to my delight, he took his wife in his arms and kissed her.

FINIS

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO., GATE STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS;
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.







